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Introduction

New Cover:

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The following acts as a prequel to Incoming Storm, and gives additional context for the events of that story.

Enjoy!

Allegiances

RiverClan

Leader

Troutstar - Brown tom with darker brown speckles and shining green eyes, formerly known as Troutspeckle; 110 moons

Deputy

Shimmerclaw - Russet-grey she-cat with a long claw mark on her left side and blue eyes; 145 moons

Medicine Cat

Frostbark - White tom with a grey stripe on back and a grey speckled tail and ice blue eyes; 150 moons

Warriors

(Senior warriors - old enough to have seen the reign of Frogstar)

Brightclaw - Bright ginger she-cat with ragged ears and amber eyes; 140 moons

Mousefang - Small dusky brown tom with one yellow eye and one dark orange eye, and a protruding tooth; 125 moons

Apprentice, Carppaw

Iceleap - Pure white tom with blue eyes and massive ears; 110

moons

(Warriors named by Troutstar)

Firbush - Dark brown tom with piercing amber eyes; 85 moons

Streamclaw - Pale blue tabby cat with amber eyes, former rogue; 65 moons in clan

Apprentice, Basspaw

Midnightstorm - Lilac-black tom with small rounded ears and amber eyes; 60 moons

Snowflight - Tall white she-cat with pale blue eyes; 30 moons

Sparkmist - Tall pale ginger tabby she-cat with bright blue eyes; 20 moons

Apprentices

Carppaw - Large pale ginger tabby tom with fluffy fur and amber eyes

Basspaw - Lanky silver tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Elders

Flamelight - Pale ginger tabby she-cat with a massive scar on muzzle and pale amber eyes; 180 moons

Silverbrook - Pale grey tom with blue eyes; 160 moons

Nursery Parents

Moonlightheart - Pale blue-grey she-cat with gold eyes; 65 moons (parent to Thornkit and Batkit)

Gorsefern - Small grey tabby tom with amber eyes; 60 moons (parent to Thornkit and Batkit)

Lilacstorm - Purple-black she-cat with small rounded ears and amber eyes; 60 moons (parent to Darkkit, Nightkit, and Minnowkit)

Spikewillow - Brown she-cat with spiky fur and green eyes; 40 moons (parent to Pebblekit)

Kits

Thornkit - Calico she-cat with one green eye and one blue eye; 3 moons

Batkit - White tom with grey splotches and amber eyes; 3 moons

Darkkit - Black she-cat with green eyes; 3 moons

Nightkit - Black tom with amber eyes; 3 moons

Minnowkit - Pale grey-purple she-cat with purple eyes; 3.5 moons

Pebblekit - Grey she-cat with blue eyes; 2 moons

ThunderClan

Leader

Mightystar - Extremely small pure white she-cat with deep blue eyes, formerly known as Tinypelt

Deputy

Eagletalon- Heavily built dark brown tabby tom with a pale underbelly and piercing amber eyes

Apprentice, Redpaw

Medicine Cat

Larchbreeze- ginger tom

Elite

(cats have earned favour with Mightystar and the heads of the Swift-Runners, Prey-Catchers, and Fierce-Protectors)

Swiftclaw - Well muscled calico she-cat with green eyes (head of the Swift-Runners)

Brownspike - Young fluffy smaller than average pale brown she-cat with amber eyes (head of the Prey-Catchers)

Cloudstorm - Old battle-scarred blue-grey tom with green eyes (manages hostages)

Apprentice, Clawpaw

Fiercebreeze - Imposing white tom with scars criss crossing his flank(head of the Fierce-Protectors)

Warriors

Fierce-Protectors

Smokeblaze - Large dark grey-black tom with amber eyes

Forestcrunch - Massive mottled brown tom with amber eyes

Apprentice, Applepaw

Nettleclaw - Massive blue-grey tabby tom

Swift-Runners

Ravenfire - Pure black she-cat with a long, angular frame with yellow-green eyes

Owlspike - Brown tom with a white chest and amber eyes

Adderjaw - White she-cat with brown and cream speckles

Prey-Catchers

Icefall - Very pale grey she-cat

Apprentice, Snappaw

Blade - Cream tabby tom with amber eyes (formerly a kittypet named Cake)

Tinypelts

(Cats who fail to be good enough for Mightystar's standards, and dislikable cats)

Tabbywillow - Old pale grey tabby tom; formerly a loner

Apprentice, Stick

Shortleap - small dark brown and white tabby she-cat

Apprentice, Twig

Quickrun - large white tom

Apprentice, Nightpaw

Littlesnow - Grey she-cat with darker grey flecks and dark blue eyes (found as a stray)

Beanleg - Brown she-cat with green eyes (mother to Stick and Twig)

Apprentices

Redpaw - Dark ginger and white tom with green eyes and an oddly high pitched voice

Applepaw - Small sandy-brown she-cat with dark amber eyes

Snappaw - Small brown and cream tom

Clawpaw - Dark brown tabby tom with dark blue eyes and a scarred chest

Nightpaw - Black tom

Stick - Small brown tom with amber eyes (identical to Twig)

Twig - Small brown tom with amber eyes (identical to Stick)

Nursery

Fireflood - Dark ginger she-cat with blue eyes (mother to Fiercebreeze's kit, Mossykit)

Frostshade - Russet she-cat with green eyes (mother to Blade's kits, Sweetkit, Creamkit, and Fluffkit)

Softlaunch - Gigantic black she-cat with small ears and amber eyes (mother to Forestcrunch's kits, Scarletkit and Boulderkit)

Kits

Mossykit - Brown, dark ginger, and white she-kit with amber eyes

Sweetkit - Pale ginger she-kit with dark amber eyes

Creamkit - Cream tom with green eyes

Roachkit- Russet-brown she-kit with green eyes

Scarletkit - Cream she-kit with a permanent limp and green eyes

Boulderkit - Massive pale grey tom with amber eyes and a protruding tooth

Elders

Crowflood - Pale grey tom with black speckles and deep green eyes

Venomfang - Virtually deaf brown and ginger tabby she-cat with amber eyes

ShadowClan

Leader

Woodstar- Old brown-orange tabby tom with yellow eyes and tattered ears

Deputy

Sparkleflower - Calico she-cat with amber eyes; formerly a kittypet

Medicine Cat

Redhaze- Small grey and black tom with pale ginger patches, formerly a warrior

Apprentice, Softpaw

Warriors

Quietheart - White she-cat with a missing tail and amber eyes

Nightdapple - Very small mottled dark grey tom with a ragged left ear

Whitesun - Long white tom with a mane of fur, a sun shaped patch of grey fur on his chest, and amber eyes

Apprentice, Ivypaw

Snowshard - Pristine white she-cat with brown markings on legs and grey eyes

Flypelt - Scrawny yet muscular dark grey tom with yellow-green eyes

Yellowclaw - Pale ginger tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Apprentices

Softpaw - long-legged muscular dark ginger she-cat with pale blue eyes

Ivypaw - ginger tom with blue eyes

Nursery

Frogspeckle - Pale brown tabby she-cat with a white underbelly and amber eyes; mother to Spicekit (a dark brown she-kit with amber eyes)

Elders

Maplewish - Black tom with ice-blue eyes and a missing left ear

Frostdawn - Heavily scarred white and cream she-cat with amber eyes

Morningmist- Silver tabby she-cat with long claws and amber eyes

WindClan

Leader

Breezestar- Elegant white she-cat with long legs, a wiry frame, and amber eyes

Deputy

Warrenfrost - Jumpy white tom with long-legs, a stubby tail and amber eyes

Medicine Cat

Hollowshine - Tortoiseshell and white she-cat with piercing, deep blue eyes

Apprentice, Leappaw

Warriors

Lilyfrost- Strong, big, brown tabby she-cat with a white underbelly and a bite in tail

Silvernight - Scrawny, slender black she-cat with silver stripes, a missing ear, a limp, and teal eyes

Forestdapple - Long-legged scarred brown she-cat with cream patches and amber eyes

Havenmist - Small light brown tom with deep blue eyes and hunched shoulders and amber eyes

Apprentice, Silverpaw

Oakbelly - Long-legged brown tom with a twisted hind paw and a lighter underbelly and green eyes

Doveflight- Strong, muscular grey she-cat with a scarred muzzle and green eyes

Finchwind - Crow-black tom with hostile blue-green eyes

Apprentice, Hawkpaw

Blazelight - Brown, cream and white she-cat with dark grey eyes

Apprentices

Leappaw - Spotted grey and white tom with green eyes

Hawkpaw- Dark brown tom with dark grey ears, muzzle, tail, and amber eyes

Silverpaw - Silver tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Elders

(Much to the astonishment of the other clans, WindClan has no elders. Some cats theorise that something malicious is happening to their old cats, but WindClan cats vehemently denies this.)

Nursery

Sunshinetail - Dark grey she-cat with white paws and tail and amber eyes

Prologue

It was a cold and dark night, like many nowadays, with leaf-bare in full swing. All the vegetation was long gone, swallowed up by the piercing and icy jaws of leaf-bare. Even the moon seemed to forever be casting eerie long shadows over the entirety of the wilderness. It was truly a desolate landscape, and only the strongest seemed to make it through every night.

The night was scarily silent. No birds tweeted in the sky; they were few and far between these days. The bubbling and gurgling stream, which always brought such comfort to the warriors in their camp, seemed to be silent. It was caught in an endless battle with the ice; always fighting to not freeze up entirely. Every single aspect of nature was holding its breath, waiting for a newleaf that never seemed to come. Although, tonight was different. It was *completely* silent, motionless, deserted.

Perhaps the only sign that there were survivors were the three shadows, inside a den thickly woven with reeds. The den, which lay clustered among half-a-dozen others which was the warriors' home. RiverClan camp, it had once been called, although now it felt desolate, soulless.

The moon began to rise higher in the sky, taunting the warriors with its capability to rise and fall every day, for all eternity. The warriors would be lucky if they were able to survive for the next quarter moon, on the amount of prey that was available.

Suddenly, the quiet of the night was abruptly shattered to pieces by a high pitched shriek, which sounded from the den with the three shadows. A former warrior stared down at the den from up above, floating in the air. She let out a half-purr as she heard the screech, knowing, or hoping with all her heart that it would be finished soon. Then, they could all rest easier.

The former warrior blinked slowly as a breeze strengthened,

blowing the screech away. The former warrior's gaze was transfixed on the den, as she moved closer. She was like the wind now, moving softly over the hard earth and thickly packed snow, without having to worry about anything at all. She had control, and she was going to prove it tonight.

As the former warrior drifted closer to the camp, she quickly looked around, wondering if she would meet some old friends here. Well, perhaps *friends* was the wrong word. The truth was, she had never returned to this place since the... since the accident. It was always easy to find someone below her to do the grunt work, but today was different.

She glanced around the semi circle of the half a dozen dens before standing rigid, silent as a shadow at the one with the screeching.

Almost as soon as she had had that thought, a sudden screech abruptly shattered the stillness of the night. *Good,* she thought darkly.

From the entrance of the den, there were three shadows visible. The she-cat tilted her head slightly as she stared at the one closest to the exit. This shadow was clearly distressed, she could see round eyes blazing with fear and frustration and claws, sharp as blades digging into the frozen earth. *Tom.* The former warrior rolled her eyes. A tail could be seen flicking to and fro and the sound of light, crunching paw steps as the shadow walked fearfully to and fro, as though guarding the labouring queen from the fluffy snow outside. The second was writhing in agony on the cold floor, as she had been for what was likely hours now, her struggles waning with each spasm. The third shadow sat as still as a rock, watching the queen's pain, but not able to help in any way.

"Can you not do anything more, Frostbark," the pacing tom shadow snarled, unsheathing his claws, then, just loud enough for the healer to hear, he muttered, "what's the point in having you here if you're just going to stand over her and not move, like... like a bump on a log!"

"Oh, are you the leader now? Here to exile the cat who literally helped your mother give birth to you?" Frostbark shot back, "are

you the healer with 140 moons of healing and medicine experience. And you think you're doing any better, Treeleap? Pacing the den like a lost, anxious kitten is *definitely* more productive than watching the vitals of a labouring queen."

The tom, Treeleap, stared mutely at the leaf litter flooring of the small den, he was clearly panicked, distressed, and visibly embarrassed by his outburst. He inhaled sharply as though about to come up with a retort, before staring at the she-cat standing under Frostbark. He then whirled around and stumbled out of the den numbly. Frostbark turned back to the labouring queen, and returned to mumbling irritably to himself.

"Seems as though Starclan themselves don't want the little one alive. No milkweed or thyme left in this cold snowy season. All seems lost to us. I wonder why..."

His train of thought was abruptly shattered by the nursing queen, Spikewillow, who had started lashing out with her forepaws, landing a blow on his own forepaw. She looked in so much pain. If Spikewillow, the furious and strong she-cat who had survived many bloody battles against their rival clan, Thunderclan, couldn't survive this, then he honestly didn't know who could. He ran a paw soothingly down the tense ridge of Spikewillow's neck, which allowed her frenzied blows to stop for the moment at least.

A sudden sound caught Frostbark. Paw steps, which didn't sound like that of any cats in Riverclan. They were quiet, yet Frostbark knew that quiet pawsteps often yielded more dangerous foes than pawsteps that were loud and boisterous. He whirled around just in time to hear the cat open their jaws and speak.

"The kit has to die."

Frostbark widened his eyes in pure, genuine amazement at the two cats who stood before him. They both glowed blue and bright, and yet he could see the leaves and trees behind them. Their pelts were glossy, and they seemed to be two times the size of any normal cats. He instantaneously knew who, or rather what, they were. He let out an internal snarl; *spirit cats*.

"Don't be shy," the second spirit cat butted in smoothly, "don't you remember me, your mother. I trust Earthstar to deal with you," she murmured smugly with a quick glance at the gigantic tom, "I shouldn't impose on this... mhm this heart-to-heart. But I thought you might want to know, Frosty, that your mother approves of this plan."

For a few seconds, Frostbark could only stare back in astonishment at the she-cat who stood before him. She was slim, more white than blue, and with those piercing eyes that seemed to stare right into his very soul. He opened his jaws to snap at her, but to his horror, no words came out, his jaws merely moved silently and he clamped his jaws shut.

Frostbark fluffed up his pelt against the waves of memories that threatened to overtake him of his time growing up with this vile cat. He took a deep, shuddering breath. Those years. Shouting. Claws digging into his pelt, telling him who he should be what he should be. Years later, those sharp blurring memories still haunted his dreams in the dark of night.

When he looked up again, only the massive hulking tom remained, looking as smug and bemused as though he had just watched a two moon old kit trip over their tail. *She's gone then... for now.*

"The kit has to die," the tom repeated as though reminding Frostbark of their current discussion.

"Why is that? You do know and understand what you're saying right? Letting two or more innocent cats die?" Frostbark let the fury in, bringing new strength to his trembling legs.

"Yes," Earthstar serenely said, staring down at Frostbark with his chin high and raised.

He looked almost entirely relaxed, Frostbark reflected, as though the two of them were merely chatting about the weather today. Frostbark saw right through the massive tom's act, though, his green eyes were flashing, revealing Earthstar's true feelings; irritation and resentment.

"You don't talk much for a big, scary leader cat, do you?" Frostbark remarked coldly, staring right at those furious green eyes with his own ice blue eyes.

Earthstar took a deep breath, visibly trying hard to relax his body that was quivering with irritation. He looked irritably at the empty space where his she-cat ally had abandoned him. "Wish I knew why that fox-dunged she-cat thought this could work," he thought privately. Out loud, he said serenely to the medicine cat "surely you've received the visions...? Know what she will do? Know how easy it is to just stamp the life- the fire- out now?"

Frostbark glowered at the tom, seething with fury. "Fox-dung to that," he spat at the tom before turning away. He took a deep breath, trying to determine whether he felt cold fury, or those horrific memories. "I've trusted lies before. Been fed them my whole life, actually. But I won't make the same mistake again. Find some other cat to do your dirty work."

Earthstar's eyes were blazing now, and he looked as if he wanted to attack Frostbark with those massive unsheathed claws. He bent close and murmured gently to Frostbark "what's to lose in letting them go?"

Frostbark stood up proudly and defiantly, "that kit will live because I am a warrior, and warriors fight to their last breath to help each other. Warriors fight, and I won't let you steal the kit."

He closed his eyes briefly, then opened them. Frostbark had expected to see rage, anger, resentment on the face of Earthstar, but instead the massive blue tom's eyes were round as the moon, with his jaw hinged open. Frostbark turned in the direction Earthstar was looking, and saw a small grey she-kit curled up beside Spikewillow. The exhausted queen lifted her tired gaze to face him, trembling.

"It all happened so fast..." she murmured to him drowsily, "You were spitting nonsense, Frostbark, but then you said something about warriors fighting to the death, and something kicked in, I guess."

As her eyes closed, Frostbark turned to her and gently murmured in

her ear, "rest now Spikewillow."

He rounded on the massive hulking shape that blocked the entrance to the den, a smug expression on his face. "Well?" he asked the tom.

"Of course I, out of the goodness of my heart, decided to let her live," Earthstar announced, "but she must never, *never,* become leader. You know what will happen, Frostbark. You know what will become of you, and all the cats you love..."

Frostbark let a small half-smile spread across his face. "Yeah, sure." As Earthstar faded from his view, the light fading from his eyes, Frostbark muttered, "Speak your garbage to some other cat next time, why don't you."

Frostbark let his rigid muscles relax, and padded over to Spikewillow, the successful new mother. He wasn't one for friendly gestures, or any sort of vulnerability, but as he settled himself beside Spikewillow, and nuzzled the tiny she-kit affectionately. As he left the den in search of strengthening herbs for Spikewillow, he smiled genuinely for the first time in moons.

What Frostbark didn't see was Earthstar, a mere shadow on the horizon chuckling to himself, "we might just do that," as he tossed a small pebble carelessly towards the looming darkness, and Thunderclan territory.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1

A small grey she-cat was padding silently through the undergrowth that screened the camp wall. It was nighttime, with gloomy shadows of massive trees on the forest floor. Her jaws opened slightly, as she tasted the air for the intruder. Her blue eyes flashed in the gloom of night as she stalked forward silently. There. An enemy was lurking in the shadows. A danger that she needed to attack for the safety of Riverclan. The trees swayed and an owl hooted, but the intruder didn't seem in any way disturbed. Her paws crackled on loose twigs and reddish orange leaves that had fallen from the towering trees. Still the intruder, her prey didn't seem alarmed. The she-cat raced forward preparing for an epic pounce, when suddenly teeth hooked her scruff, and she winced with pain.

The she-cat rounded on the new attacker, trying to see who they were. An enemy? A shrill of horror raced through her body and she raised her forepaw, ready to lash out at the muzzle of the cat that held her captive, when suddenly the voice spoke, and she recognized Riverclan scent.

"Pebblekit! What are you doing sneaking out of camp at this hour, and trying to sneak up on moths nonetheless, honestly I expect better of you."

The teeth clamped her scruff harder, as the cat carried Pebblekit back, unceremoniously into camp. "Ok I only walked three steps outside of camp, though," Pebblekit muttered huffily, staring up at the irritable face of her mother. She half expected Spikewillow to walk her all the way to the leader's den to complain to Troutstar about her misbehaving, but Spikewillow's eyes were tired, and her tail tip lashed back and forth as she set Pebblekit down in front of the nursery den.

Gorsefern, a warrior who was living in the nursery with his kits

blinked up at Spikewillow, as he peeked his head out of the nursery. His eyes were fearful and nervous, until they landed on Pebblekit, and his entire composure visibly relaxed. He padded out of the nursery to give Pebblekit an affectionately lick on her head. Spikewillow, apparently satisfied, turned away from the nursery den, and Gorsefern and Pebblekit.

"Don't do that again," Pebblekit's mother muttered irritably, "now I am going to be tired and unproductive on the dawn patrol." Her tail lashed once more as she padded into the gloom towards the den where most of the warriors slept. "Oh, and Gorsefern, do me a favour and wake up some other warrior on the Pebblekit rescue mission next time." With that, Pebblekit's mother was gone.

"Productivity," Gorsefern sighed, "that's all she cares about nowadays." He jerked his head down as though suddenly remembering that Pebblekit was laying forlornly at his paws. Pebblekit sighed, she would never understand what Spikewillow thought about her, or how she was her mother, and yet spent little to no time with her.

"Cold out, isn't it," Gorsefern mewed brightly to Pebblekit, although Pebblekit saw right through his act. *He's trying to cheer me up because I don't have a mother that cares about me or something.* Gorsefern nudged Pebblekit out of the large clearing that was Riverclan camp, and into the warm, cozy nursing den. Pebblekit instantly bolted over to her nest, which was at the far side of the den, scuttling over the tails of the other kits and warriors in the den. The nursing den was safe, but also boring.

As Pebblekit shut her eyes and curled up for the second time that night, she heard Gorsefern whispering softly to his mate, Moonlightheart, "she was up again tonight..." Pebblekit strained her ears to hear more, "...It would help if Spikewillow was more invested in her... not a good influence."

Pebblekit shut out all the whirring thoughts in her head, and let sleep claim her at last.

Pebblekit was dreaming of the event that had happened two days before her midnight moth hunting adventure. She was sitting at the

edge of the camp, watching Nightkit and Minnowkit play moss ball against Darkkit and Batkit, while Thornkit was looking at herbs with Frostbark. In her dream, Pebblekit thought proudly of how she was sitting up like a strong, mature apprentice, and not falling into kit tendencies of playing and jumping around. Spikewillow always talked about productivity, and diligence, and Pebblekit thought she would be pleased. Suddenly, there was a clamour outside the camp barrier, and a bloodied red-grey she-cat burst into the camp, her eyes flashing wildly.

"Thunderclan attacked us inside of our own border," she gasped, "more than half a dozen warriors..." Troutstar raced forward to meet the she-cat.

He spoke calmly, but his eyes were flashing wildly, "where are the others? You were part of the dusk patrol, correct Shimmerclaw?"

Shimmerclaw nodded numbly, her flanks heaving. "They're coming...Treeleap..." she gasped, her eyes widening, and then collapsed to the leaf-littered floor."

Troutstar looked at all the warriors, stepping between them and the unconscious she-cat. Frostbark walked forward and touched Shimmerclaw. He gave Troutstar a nod. Pebblekit pushed her way to the center of the crowd, "let me fight! Let me fight!" She begged Troustar, but he didn't even look at her.

"Midnightstorm, Brightclaw, Mousefang, Iceleap, go find the rest of the patrol. You too Frostbark, those cats will need a medicine cat to help them," Troutstar's voice was loud and commanding, but then he turned around and his jaw dropped.

"The patrol!"

"They're here!"

"Uh... is that Treeleap?"

Voices rang around the clearing as cats rushed forward to meet their injured clanmates. Pebblekit looked back at Troutstar, who was looking at Shimmerclaw, his eyes disturbed, "let me fight

Thunderclan! I'll rip their pelts off," she squealed.

Troutstar's eyes flashed as though he was about to give the three moon old she-cat a harsh chastising for her disrespect, but then he turned away and raced towards the cluster of cats around where the patrol had fallen at the entrance to the camp. Pebblekit was about to race over, when suddenly she heard words that chilled her to the bone.

"Treeleap is dead. Lost to us, and worst of all Thunderclan sent a message that they were taking that massive chunk of prey rich territory they've been eyeing these past few moons."

Dead? Her father. Dead. Pebblekit keeled over in shock and disbelief, and threw up. He had never talked much to her, and bickered so much with their mother, but she couldn't believe he was just gone. Did that mean he was weak? That *she* was weak? The world was spinning around her as yowls rose up around the clearing and the reek of blood surrounded her. Territory lost... her father dead... Pebblekit looked up, took one look at Treeleap's flanks plastered with blood, and then the world went dark.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2

Darkkit looked at Pebblekit who lay forlornly in her nest feeling irritated. *If she's upset, why doesn't the mousebrain talk to us?* She fluffed up her pelt against the cold of the morning. She had better things to do than look at the grey she-cat staring blankly into space. *In two moons, I'll be an apprentice,* she thought to herself, *then I'll be able to figure Pebblekit out.*

Darkkit liked the idea that everything had a place, everything was black and white. Her place was in Riverclan, as a warrior alongside her brother Nightkit. Prey's place was on the freshkill pile, where hungry warriors would be able to feed to keep their strength up. Thunderclan's place was on their own stinky crow-food infested territory, and so on. She had never figured out Pebblekit though, and her place in the story.

Stretching, Darkkit made her way out of the nursery den and into the crisp leafbare morning. There were only a few warriors left in camp; most had gone out on either hunting and border patrols. Darkkit let her eyes adjust to the sunlight, so different from the warm darkness of the nursery den, before looking in search of her denmates. She scanned the camp. Thornkit was dutifully helping the medicine cat, Frostbark with healing the vicious injuries of cats from the battle with ThunderClan. Thornkit's brother, Batkit was resting his eyes in a shady spot by the warriors den, letting out occasional snores. It took significantly longer for Darkkit to pick out Minnowkit and Nightkit, but soon enough she saw them sitting by the river at the far edge of the camp, and raced over to greet them.

"So, what are you two up to?" she asked casually.

Nightkit jumped, then turned around, his black fur fluffed up, "Darkkit!" her brother exclaimed, then hesitated, "thought you were a Starclan warrior for a second there..."

Minnowkit blinked at Darkkit, "we're gathering mystical magical circles to summon the Starrycats," she explained as though that was supposed to completely clear up Darkkit's bewilderment.

Minnowkit, or Min as she preferred to be called, hadn't been born into the clans, but had instead shown up just outside of their territory when she was around two moons old. She was certainly a very unique cat, enjoying gathering all sorts of bizarre items from river stones to bird feathers to keep in the nursery. She called cats and other such things by different names, like "Thundercats" for Thunderclan, or "Trouty" for Troutstar (behind his back of course), but what set her apart from all the other cats was her general attitude. She was so upfront, blunt, and trusting, and Darkkit didn't entirely like that about her. *I like to have my secrets,* she thought.

Nightkit butted in, glancing between Min's bright gaze, and Darkkit's bewilderment, "Uh... Min wants to get Starclan to come here so that Pebblekit can see her dad again."

Min nodded serenely, "Peb's been in a dull mood lately, we thought we could help her out."

Darkkit shrugged, "*Pebblekit's* always in a bad mood," she muttered.

Min glanced at the stones and shrugged. "It's not workin' well though... oooh, what if we used it to summon the Thundercats instead."

"Let's not," Nightkit said. Min laughed and nudged him, and he nudged her back affectionately.

"The leaves are so cool at this time of year," Min announced, abruptly changing the subject, "especially in the Thundercats' area"

Darkkit fluffed up her pelt, "you actually went there?" she muttered jealousy. *I would never do that, no loyal kit would.* When she saw her littermate, Nightkit's, awestruck expression, though, she decided to leave the two best friends to enjoy their discussion.

Darkkit fluffed up her pelt, and padded to the den, she noted that Pebblekit was now talking to the clan leader, Troutstar. She padded

forward with a prick of jealousy. *What makes her so special that she gets Troutstar's entire attention?* He had never so much as glanced at Darkkit as though she wasn't someone worth listening to, or even worth existing. More and more lately, she had noticed these meetings between the clan leader and the three moon old kit. *Just because they're kin doesn't mean he should be wasting so much time with an annoying kit.* She padded closer, straining her ears to hear what they were talking about, fearful that a warrior might notice her and call her out for eavesdropping.

"So, Pebblekit, how about I take you out of camp. No more of those sneaky tricks. I need my warriors to stay in line."

Darkkit padded closer and hid herself behind a small grey boulder that had a little bit of green lichen on it. She didn't like the fact that Troutstar was calling Pebblekit a warrior, after all the small whiny kit was anything but. She settled herself comfortably down and listened.

"You must remember to hold yourself with a certain dignity, young Pebblekit," Troutstar mewed, "after all you might be the cat to succeed me as leader when Shimmerclaw retires."

"Really?" Pebblekit squeaked dubiously, "I'm not sure I'm the best cat for leadership. I'm so clumsy and anxious, that's what my Mom thinks anyway."

"Spikewillow is a fox-hearted mousebrain who only looks out for herself, and thinks that somehow she can get in my good will by mating with my brother and joining every patrol. Really, It's cats like you and me, Pebblekit who are the true heroes of RiverClan," Troutstar sighed, "you remind me so much of my brother, you have the same body shape, the same untapped potential, the same desire to hide your special talents."

"But Treeleap was weak," Pebblekit said bluntly, "he died. That's what Spikewillow thinks."

"Spikewillow's opinions are irrelevant. I'll deal with her Pebblekit, don't you worry little one. Treeleap's as weak as you and I are. Thunderclan only targeted him because he intimidated them,"

Troutstar said.

Darkkit dug her claws into the ground. Weak? Unimportant? She thought that Troutstar didn't interact with the kits or apprentices because they were "immature" and "inexperienced," but now he was completely disregarding the opinions of one of his mature warriors. *Spikewillow is kind of a jerk, though,* she reflected. She wondered, though, if he belittled all his warriors who got too vocal about their own opinions.

"You're the mousebrain," Darkkit muttered quietly, and promptly spat at the dirt.

"Hey, hey, hey, what's a little kit like you doing eavesdropping on a private conversation, and insulting our leader?" Darkkit whirled around just in time to see the massive, hulking shape of one of Troutstar's biggest supporters. *Foxdung!*

"Erm..." Darkkit's voice went dry as she stared at the tom, Firbush, his claws unsheathed, his teeth bared in a snarl, "I was just..."

"I always knew kits were trouble," he muttered, "now then, what shall I do with this little troublemaker."

Firbush gripped her scruff and carried her over to Troutstar. Darkkit winced as his teeth dug harder into her scruff. Troutstar's eyes widened as he saw Firbush carrying Darkkit toward him, which then turned a look of half amusement.

"That's a mighty big piece of freshkill," he said looking at the Firbush as the massive dark brown tom dropped Darkkit in front of the clan leader, "I told you to get me a carp, not a kitten."

Firbush let out a small huff of annoyance aimed towards Darkkit, "she was eavesdropping on your conversation, sir. Called you a mousebrain too."

Troutstar fluffed up his brown pelt, which was speckled with spots of darker brown. He narrowed his green eyes at Darkkit. The she-kit had a sudden spark of fear shrill through her. *He can do anything to me and no one will lift a paw to stop him- because they can't.*

"Shadowkit, what is the meaning of this disrespectful behaviour," he asked her, almost casually, "you should know by now that I don't tolerate unkindness and disrespect in Riverclan."

Pebblekit blinked up at Troutstar's face with round eyes. "You're not going to hurt her, right?" she mewed.

Troutstar shook his head ruefully, "of course not," he mewed, "it just saddens me to see such disrespect from our young. You do know the story of our past leader, Frogstar, don't you, Shadowkit? He ruled by force and fear, and left lasting scars on our oldest generation of warriors, literally and metaphorically. It's because of arrogant cats who disregarded the rules that he remained in power for so long. I have been a leader for seasons and seasons; what right do you have to question my authority, kit?"

Darkkit fluffed up her pelt. He had called her Shadowkit. *Why are leaders so smart, yet manipulative?* She could understand the ration of his words, and yet, she *did* feel like she had a right to question his authority. *Can't have leaders getting more cocky than they already are.*

Firbush blinked irritably, and lashed his tail, "why are you letting her off so easily, Troutstar," he mewed, "she deserves punishment for her disobedience."

Troutstar stood tall over Darkkit, addressing Firbush, "I believe this will be sufficient punishment for now, Firbush. In fact, I will give you this kit as an apprentice, and you can straighten her out in any way you see fit."

Apparently satisfied, Firbush walked off to the freshkill pile in search of a carp. Pebblekit looked up at Darkkit with wide anxious, pitying eyes. Troutstar, seeming satisfied as well, walked off to his den, leaving only Pebblekit and Darkkit in the clearing.

"That was a bit reckless, Darkkit," Pebblekit chastised, "if you're ever jealous of Troutstar, I'll give you some training lessons to help you be a better warrior.

"No thanks," Darkkit said through gritted teeth, "I'm fine, Pebblekit."

Pebblekit shrugged and walked off towards the nursery. *Arrogant furball!* Darkkit stomped off just in time to see the rest of the kits, Thornkit, Batkit, Nightkit, and Minnowkit staring at her with round eyes.

"Wow," Batkit breathed.

"Interesting," Thornkit announced.

Darkkit looked up at the four of them and felt everything that had been weighing her down let loose. "I just can't stand Pebblekit," she began, "the way she holds herself, the way she acts, the way *Troutstar* of all cats adores her and prepares her for leadership even though there are so many better cats for leadership. I just can't stand her, and I don't know why."

Darkkit felt the world shift beneath her. She thought it would feel better to let it out, but now she felt miserable. *Am I an awful cat?* Nightkit nudged her trembling flank, and Minnowkit blinked up at her with kindness in her lilac eyes. She suddenly realized that she was trembling.

"Hey, It's all good," Nightkit nudged her, "It's been a stressful few moons with the Thunderclan attack, and the sickness last half moon. But you can't blame Pebblekit for any of it. She's young- we all are, and we're going to make mistakes and sometimes get others hurt. We have got to keep going though, and not go too hard on each other."

Minnowkit nodded agreeably, "don't make mouseybrained choices out of jealousy." she touched Darkkit with her tail tip.

Batkit shrugged indifferently, "if it makes you feel any better, I'm not exactly a huge Pebblekit fan either."

Darkkit felt touched by her denmates' kindness. *It will get better,* she thought, *it has to.*

Chapter 3

Chapter 3

"Pebblepaw! Thornpaw! Batpaw! Darkpaw! Nightpaw! Minnowpaw!"

Pebblepaw fluffed up her fur excitedly as she looked around at all her clanmates cheering out her name. *This is it!* She was finally an apprentice. Pebblepaw wasn't sure she could feel any warmer, even as she fluffed up her pelt against the cold leaf-bare chill. Her rival, Darkpaw, didn't seem to be sharing her same excitement, though. It was understandable; Firbush wasn't exactly the dream mentor.

"So, how does it feel to finally be an apprentice, Pebblepaw?" Pebblepaw turned to see her new mentor padding up to her again, now that the crowd was disbursing. Her wounds still looked painful from the Thunderclan skirmish, but thankfully their rivals hadn't attacked them upfront again in the past two moons.

"I feel great!" Pebblepaw announced cheerfully, "I didn't expect to get the clan deputy of all cats as my mentor. I'm so glad I'm an apprentice even though I'm only five moons old!"

Shimmerclaw hesitated before answering, "yes," she admitted, "that was a surprise for me as well."

Pebblepaw blinked anxiously up at her mentor. *Did I do something wrong?* Shimmerclaw was usually so cheerful and mischievous despite her age.

Then, Shimmerclaw flicked her ears, as though she was dismissing her thoughts. Pebblepaw wondered what would happen next as the last of her clanmates disbursed and returned to the rest of their duties. She noted that Carptuft and Basstail, the two new warriors that had been promoted today as well, were digging into the freshkill pile, and preparing themselves for their long nighttime vigil.

"Well Pebblepaw," Shimmerclaw began again, "I'll give you until sunhigh to adjust yourself to being a 'paw, and then I'll talk to the rest of the mentors to get all six of you new apprentices to tour Riverclan's vast territory together!"

Pebblepaw blinked eagerly, "alright Shimmerclaw," she nodded agreeably.

The clan deputy and her new mentor nudged her affectionately, "sneaking out isn't illegal now Pebblepaw, but don't take that for granted," she said with a slight laugh, and then padded away, giving Pebblepaw a wry, mischievous glance, "I did it too, as a kit, of course."

Pebblepaw bounded toward her mother. She expected Spikewillow to be happy, but the warrior was glowering at her, pelt bushed up in agitation.

"I thought I raised you better," she spat at Pebblepaw, "being a little tattletale, and whining off to Troutstar whenever things don't go your way. Now he despises me, and it's all your fault. We're cutting ties now Pebble*paw,* once and for all. I owe you nothing now."

Pebblepaw merely walked away sadly. Troutstar had told her that Spikewillow wasn't worth the effort. She always talked to him about everything that Spikewillow did, or said to her, but that didn't make her a tattletale. She noticed that by contrast to her own mother, Lilacstorm, mother to Nightpaw and Darkpaw was nuzzling her two kits affectionately.

"It will be good to finally patrol with you two," she said to them proudly, "the nursery is so cramped, and all you can really do is sit there being bored, but when you're out in the forest everything is different. You can truly live out your best life, fighting, patrolling, and catching freshkill for your clan- I can't imagine a more fulfilling life."

Pebblepaw fluffed up her pelt eagerly and proudly. *I am going to be the best apprentice ever. Nothing will ever hurt Riverclan again!*

"And this, young cats, is the Windclan border. They can be kind of

StarClan-crazy and are a little bit prickly on the whole, but we've managed not to lose any territory to them so far under Troutstar's leadership."

Pebblepaw was on her first ever trip outside of clan territory. She and Shimmerclaw were at the lead of the patrol. She remembered a time a few moons ago when she would have darted into Windclan's own camp to attack them, after she had learned of their attack on Spikewillow and Riverclan. *I was always a reckless kit,* Pebblepaw reflected, *now that I'm an apprentice, and I won't have time for being mischievous!*

Windclan's territory was on a moor with gently sloping hills that seemed to stretch on endlessly into the pure blue horizon. It seemed so open, and free. As Pebblepaw stood awestruck at how big the world was, she noticed two warriors racing to catch a rabbit. Their long legs and muscular, wiry bodies propelled them rapidly over the rolling hills. They looked so different from Pebblepaw's own clanmates who had glorious long-furred pelts, and a more rounded appearance.

"Hurry up, apprentice," Pebblepaw turned around just to hear the sharp mew of Firbush, and realised that the rest of the patrol was starting to move on without her.

She propelled her short legs to catch up with the rest of the apprentices who were in the middle of the pack of mentors.

"Big isn't it?" Nightpaw mewed to her.

Pebblepaw felt a flash of irritation. *Is he trying to make excuses about my falling behind the patrol?* "It's nothing *I* can't handle," she mewed, and sprinted off to get back to the head of the patrol.

Shimmerclaw turned to look back at her, "how are the rest of your friends enjoying their first day out?" she asked cheerfully.

Pebblepaw took a second to catch her breath before responding to Shimmerclaw's question. It was really hard for her, a small five moon old apprentice, to keep up with her older denmmates. "I guess Nightpaw thinks it's a big world?" she offered, trying to make

something out of the only sentence she'd heard an apprentice say on this trip.

Shimmerclaw laughed heartily, her teal eyes bright with amusement, "that's exactly what I remember on my first day," she said, then added wryly, "I actually completely lost my mentor on my first day out. *Totally* not on purpose."

They continued walking on for what seemed like moons. Pebblepaw was now gasping for air, as the taller cats walked seemingly faster and faster. What kept her going, past all the bubbling brooks and towering trees was the thought of seeing Thunderclan territory. *If they make a fight, I can avenge my father, Treeleap, and prove that I'm not weak!*

"Here it is. Thunderclan land." Pebblepaw looked up to hear Midnightstorm, Nightpaw's mentor's angry voice. Or, at least what seemed like an angry voice for the generally emotionless, aloof tom.

Pebblepaw looked up. If she was being honest, she expected to see a rat-infested dump, with angry, bloodstained cats crawling out of the shadows to attack them. Her imagination had made her picture a land that was different from her own; twoleg rubbish strewn on the ground, the reek of rotten freshkill, a land crawling with nothing but evil.

What she actually saw was a strip of land, with a gentle gurgling stream, and the sound of two sparrows chirruping in the leafy green trees. There was a peaceful feel about the place, and the scent of freshkill was everywhere.

"Huh." Pebblepaw heard Batpaw mutter aloud, "I expected it to be a bit more..."

"Evil." Min finished.

"This is almost worse, though," Darkpaw spat, "they've taken our own glorious land, and added it to their own rotting trash heap. Of course this place is beautiful," she said quietly, "that's because it should be *our* territory."

Min walked closer to the border, with seemingly no intention of stopping at the borderline. "Look!" She called out, "there are fire flowers over here."

The other mentors began to pad away. Pebblepaw watched anxiously as Min padded closer, and closer to the ThunderClan scent marker. Only a few more pawsteps, and she was going to cross it. Min's mentor, Snowflight's pelt was bushed. It seemed that even some warriors were scared of Thunderclan's scent markers. *I guess Snowflight's always been ridiculously passive though,* Pebblepaw reflected. Suddenly, there was a screech, and a flash of black fur darted across Pebblepaw's vision, and she was being bundled into the undergrowth, and into darkness.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4

Darkkit was playing by herself outside the nursery, when suddenly a tiny kit, around her own age of one and a half moons, was brought into Riverclan camp. Her ribs were protruding, and it looked like the grey she-kit with beautiful lilac eyes hadn't eaten in days. The first thing, though, that Darkkit noticed about the mysterious new kit in camp was the thorny red flower that the kit held tightly in her jaws, refusing to let go, even though it was clearly hurting her.

The kit swung from the jaws of Snowflight. She deposited the kit at the entrance of the nursery. Gorsefern peeked his head out of the nursery, a questioning look on his face. Snowflight was trembling as she spoke, "I found this kit on our territory, Dad. Alone. Abandoned. Please don't tell Troutstar, I was the one who found her, Dad."

With that, the pure white she-cat was gone, bustling off, and out of camp. Gorsefern seemed to fluff up his fur as he looked down at the pitiful scrap of fur, who was staring at him with an odd look of confidence in her eyes. Darkkit was amazed that despite how bashed up the kit was, she still had a look of bravery and determination on her face.

Darkkit scuffled her paws, and walked closer to the mysterious kit, "that flower is hurting you," she said bluntly, "why you got it?"

The kit turned to her and deposited the flower to speak, but still held it protectively between her forepaws, "it's my fire flower," she said brightly, "m-my parents gave it to me before I lost them! I think it is a super ultra power flower!"

"Really?" Darkkit mewed, she thought of how this would help them beat Thunderclan. A flower to protect them would make them practically invincible!

"One day," the kit mewed, "I'll use the flower to find my parents, then everything will be right in the world."

Darkpaw saw the flash of fur on Thunderclan territory darting towards Min, and suddenly she was running. She pushed past Firbush and Snowflight and bolted towards the grey painted she-cat, just as Min let out an ear splitting screech. *I'm not going to let you die!* She would die first before any cat hurt her brother's best friend. Darkpaw raced past the Thunderclan border markers, wincing inwardly at the foul stench of Thunderclan, and raced towards Min.

Min was surrounded by half a dozen massive, muscular shapes, their eyes glittering with menace. One cat had Min pinned down, and had just raked one of his massive forepaws down her shoulder. *Foxheart! What kind of full grown cat would attack an apprentice on her first day out of camp?* She leaped towards him without hesitating.

She attempted to land a well aimed blow at his legs, to knock him off Min, but he saw her coming, and almost casually flicked her off her own paws. She expected the ring of Thunderclan cats to attack her, pin her down, rip her to shreds, but they stood still, watching the young tom. Luckily, She had given Min enough time to get to her paws, and out of the danger zone of the ginger and white Thunderclan tom.

"Thunderclan!" Darkpaw spat at the ring of cats, "what are you fox-hearts doing here? Her pelt bushed up, and she spat defiance at them, "I'll kill every single one of you before you hurt another one of my clanmates!"

"Huh," the tom who had been attacking Min said, then added smugly, "to even start doing that, *kit* you'll have to land a blow on me, and I'm the strongest apprentice in the forest."

Suddenly, claws dug into Darkpaw's shoulder fur, pulling her backwards painfully. *I'll get you this time!* She was about to lashed out wildly with her forepaws, when suddenly the shape gave her a hard shove backwards, and Darkpaw was stumbling backwards, she landed with a thud, her whole body jarred, her head smashed into a

rock, and the world went dark.

Darkpaw felt as though she was completely separate from her body, she was sure she had never felt this way before. A shrill of fear and horror raced through her; *Am I dead?* Suddenly, sparks flashed in her eyes, and she saw a scarred vixen fox padding towards a river. It was night out, and Darkpaw suddenly clued into the fact that she must be having some sort of dream. Darkpaw shifted her paws in bewilderment. The fox opened its massive jaws, and suddenly looked up from where it had been lapping peacefully by a river. It rapidly bounded toward her jaws agape and salivating, and darted toward her, faster than any cat she had ever seen. It swallowed her whole, and the world went dark.

"Uhh... Are you okay?" Darkpaw turned her head to see Snowflight blinking back at her anxiously.

They were in a deep section of undergrowth on Riverclan territory. It took a second for Darkpaw to adjust her eyes to the gloom. She was sprawled on her back, staring up at the round, anxious blue eyes of Snowflight.

"What?" Darkpaw managed to ask.

"O-oh yes... you were fighting Thunderclan cats to get to Minnowpaw," Snowflight began, "when Firbush picked you up and threw you out of Thunderclan territory. A little bit dangerous of him, throwing apprentices through midair, but I guess it turned out alright in the end."

Darkpaw decided not to mention the massive fox. *It was probably just my imagination, besides I don't think Snowflight could take anymore anxiety.*

She dug her claws into the ground to stand up, and shook slightly when she got on her paws, but then padded out of the dense clump of undergrowth. *Right. Time to kill some Thunderclan warriors... and also Firbush. Maybe.* She was only half joking about Firbush, so far her first day as an apprentice had probably been the worst day of her life. She had learned today the place Firbush had in her mind. *He must be the enemy, who all my clan trusts by mistake.*

She pushed past Snowflight and bolted back into the open, taking a second for her eyes to adjust to the light once more. She heard screeching on Thunderclan territory, but they seemed to be dying away, and instead she was beginning to hear triumphant caterwauls. She ran towards the place where the skirmish had taken place, trying hard not to imagine the battered and broken bodies that she might find there. The sun was beginning to set, casting eerie long shadows into the part of Thunderclan territory that had once belonged to Riverclan.

"Where do you think you're going Darkpaw? We beat Thunderclan on their own territory; the battle's over." Darkpaw turned to see Shimmerclaw racing towards her, eyes dark.

Blood was welling from a reopened wound on her shoulder, and her red-grey muzzle was dark with blood. Darkpaw looked up to see the rest of the patrol bounding toward her, all looking battered, but alive. Firbush's eyes were narrowed with disgust as he looked down at her. Darkpaw squared her shoulders and raised her chin to glower at him. *Why does he despise every cat except Troutstar?* She wondered.

"Well, I'm fine, if any of you were worried," she spat right at Firbush.

"Ok." He looked extremely unimpressed. Darkpaw noted that he didn't bare any fresh wounds. *Coward!*

"Pebblepaw! Where are you?" Shimmerclaw called out fearfully, her eyes round with worry.

Darkpaw honestly couldn't care less where the whiny, smug apprentice had gotten off to, but she was worried about Min. She looked around, and suddenly saw the she-cat sprawled on the back of Midnightstorm, slightly farther away from the rest of the warriors. Her eyes were open, but she was letting out terribly high pitched squeals and groans.

"We all need to spread out, search for Pebblepaw!" Shimmerclaw announced. Darkpaw was astounded by the deputy's guts. *As if she doesn't even notice that she herself is heavily injured!*

"Can we just get Min back to camp," Nightpaw squeaked out fearfully.

"Yeah." Batpaw echoed indifferently, then added, "I'm sure the she-cat's fine, but Min..."

"You'll call the apprentice *Minnowpaw*," Firbush hissed, rounding on the two apprentices, "and alright... the cowardly apprentice who ran from the fight can wait to be found."

The sun had set by the time the battered patrol returned to camp, except for Shimmerclaw who had decided to stay out all night in search of her apprentice. It had been a longer walk back to camp from Thunderclan's false territory than Darkpaw had anticipated. Her paw pads were cut and raw by the time she returned to camp, and she honestly just wanted to curl up in a ball and sleep for moons. It was interesting, though, how unfazed the senior Riverclan warriors had been about fighting Thunderclan. They acted as though the fearsome fight to the death was merely just another part of warrior life. Perhaps they were desensitised to it after having been ruled by the vicious Frogstar, and Thunderclan's constant aggressiveness.

Darkpaw followed the patrol as her mother's littermate, Midnightstorm, deposited an unconscious Min at the paws of Frostbark. He looked up, his ice blue eyes flashing as he looked at the rest of the patrol.

"Why," the old tom spat, "do you mousebrains always have to get so injured in every fight?"

"Deal with it," Darkpaw heard Firbush mutter under his breath, quiet enough that Frostbark wouldn't hear.

Thornpaw, the new medicine cat apprentice, looked up at the patrol and took a deep breath, "this is what I've been training for as a kit," Darkpaw heard her whisper under her breath, "all those moons of rejecting my denmates play to train with Frostbark. Now I can finally do something, *control* something in my life." She turned to the warriors speaking louder now, flicking her tail decisively. "I'll patch up any minor injuries you have."

Snowflight flicked her tail decisively and turned to the rest of the patrol and apprentices, "go get some freshkill, then go sleep. None of you have that many wounds that need dressing since we kept you *mostly* out of the fight. Thank Starclan."

Darkpaw was about to pad away, when suddenly she saw Pebblepaw eating a bass all by herself, looking calm and unhurt. *What?* She had thought Pebblepaw was missing, but the little coward was just at camp, eating fish and being blissfully unaware of Min's condition. She raced over to her angrily. Pebblepaw looked up at her with round eyes

"Where were you?" She spat, "Some cats have been worried about you. Shimmerclaw isn't even going to return to camp until she sees you safe and alive."

Pebblepaw got to her paws so that Darkpaw wasn't looming over her as much, and announced huffily, "It wasn't my choice. It was Frostbark's."

Chapter 5

Chapter 5

A full moon into her apprenticeship, and Pebblepaw had never anticipated to experience so much in her life. The other apprentices always brought back stories, but also complained about their long days spent out of camp. She, on the other hand, was just grateful for the time out of camp. She sometimes noticed the rest of her denmates crowded around together without her, but she didn't mind. After all, she was friends with the clan leader and deputy. Min was healing well, and sleeping in the apprentices den, with Thornpaw looking after her, but since she wasn't fully healed, she was still confined to camp, and did a lot of the boring in-camp apprentices duties.

"Pebblepaw? Are you awake there?" Pebblepaw shifted her gaze tiredly toward her mentor, Shimmerclaw.

They were in a small grassy clearing with a river that ran swiftly through on one edge, and a small leafy forest on the other. This was the training clearing, where Pebblepaw spent most of her days.

"Yes," she responded promptly, "I was just uh... analyzing the jump and swipe move."

Shimmerclaw looked at her dubiously, then shrugged, "we're going to do a joint training session with the other apprentices. You're going to be in a fight with Darkpaw. Batpaw and Nightpaw are also going to fight each other. Then you'll team up with Darkpaw to try and beat the two toms."

Pebblepaw blinked eagerly, and fluffed up her pelt. *Finally! I'll be able to prove to my rival how awesome a fighter I am, even though I'm small.* She turned to see Darkpaw padding towards with narrowed eyes. She narrowed her eyes right back at the slightly older apprentice. *Oh, it's on!*

She watched as Firbush whispered something in Darkpaw's ear. She nodded and paced toward Pebblepaw. Nightpaw was watching excitedly from the edge of the clearing, while Batpaw let out an enormous yawn.

"Go!" Shimmerclaw announced.

Pebblepaw sprang into action, throwing blows at Darkpaw in all directions, not knowing which ones landed, and which ones didn't. She saw Darkpaw's eyes narrow, as the black long-furred she-cat matched her wild blows with more well-aimed ones.

"Fight, mousebrain!" That was Firbush, Darkpaw's mentor's voice.

She was quick and nimble on her paws, and she was able to dodge some of Darkpaw's blows, and with the sheer number of blows Darkpaw was getting from her, she knew the apprentice must be getting hit more.

"I'll get you," Darkpaw spat, as Pebblepaw tucked into a ball and rolled.

Pebblepaw laughed giddly. This was fun. She loved watching the increasingly frustrated face of Darkpaw as she struggled to attack Pebblepaw. Pebblepaw tried the new jump and swipe move that Shimmerclaw had just taught her, and to her surprise, she pinned Darkpaw, who was exhausted from their fight. *Easy!*

She mimicked slitting Darkpaw's throat, and Darkpaw shoved her off angrily.

"That's it!" Shimmerclaw cheered, "great job you two, lots of really impressive moves for such young cats!"

"Weak," Firbush muttered, addressing Darkpaw. Her green eyes were furious as she walked over to where the other two apprentices had been sitting.

Pebblepaw sat down beside her and watched as the two other apprentices got into attack positions and began their own mock battle. Darkpaw's eyes were irritated as she looked out at the distant horizon. *I know how to help her!* Pebblepaw thought excitedly, *and...*

help my status as a maybe future leader!

"Hey Darkpaw," Pebblepaw mewed quietly, "I can help you with your battle moves so you don't fall even more behind in training, since I'm an expert!"

"Says the cat who ran away from that fight," Darkpaw muttered.

"I told you it was Frostbark," Pebblepaw mewed quietly, "he wanted to protect me? Or something like that? But he told me not to tell anyone what he did, so... don't talk too loud about it."

"Thanks for the offer," Darkpaw said, almost sarcastically, "but no. I'm going to pass it up."

"For now," Pebblepaw added, "the offer will stand for as long as you need it."

"Which I don't," Darkpaw muttered, then proceeded to continue staring irritably at the gradually darkening sky.

Pebblepaw rolled her eyes. Some cats preferred to live in blissful ignorance of the truth that was staring right in front of them. She hoped that one day her friend and rival would learn that asking for help wasn't a weakness.

By the time that Shimmerclaw called for the end of the battle between Batpaw and Nightpaw, there was no clear winner.

"Now it's time for the true battle. As warriors, we always have to work in tandem with our clanmates; that's how we win the real battles. Darkpaw and Pebblepaw, you're up against Batpaw and Nightpaw. Ready, set, Go!" Shimmerclaw called for the start of the two on two battle just as Pebblepaw was racing down the slope to meet her mentor. Pebblepaw was about to ram into Batpaw, when suddenly Nightpaw held her back from the white and light grey tom, and leaped at her.

Pebblepaw began attacking both toms, forepaws flailing about. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Darkpaw staring at her with narrowed eyes, trying to get in range for a blow. Pebblepaw suddenly realised something, *this is my chance to prove how great a*

warrior I am! She purposefully didn't let Darpaw get a blow in, and still managed to almost overpower the two toms at once.

"Are you mousebrained?" Darkpaw spat at her.

Pebblepaw spoke, her back turned to her, "no, I'm just showing you, why it's okay to ask *me* for help in fighting!"

Batpaw stared at her, "Pebblepaw...what are you meowing about?" He mewed, hesitating enough in confusion, that she was able to give him a sharp cuff around the ears.

Suddenly, a weight leaped onto her, and dug sharp, unsheathed claws onto her back. Pebblepaw let out a yowl. If the claws dug in any harder, they would draw blood. She winced in agony as the claws swiped at her ear, and she felt a trickle of blood falling down her face. She screeched, and suddenly the massive tom, Firbush, slammed into both her and the shape.

Through a haze of fear, pain, and confusion, Pebblepaw felt Shimmerclaw padding toward her, to support her, and Firbush had the writhing shape pinned down a little ways away.

Shimmerclaw opened her jaws, and was about to speak, when suddenly, there was a cry from Nightpaw, "I see a fox!"

Shimmerclaw swore, "great starclan, why do we have to deal with this foxdung right now?"

Suddenly she was herding Pebblepaw through the bushes, nudging her, and whispering her at her to run faster. The last thing Pebblepaw saw when she turned around was a massive, scarred, red shape bounding out of the bushes, and her own grey fur and blood on the ground. *I have to run!*

Chapter 6

Chapter 6

Darkpaw lay at Firbush's paws glowering up at him defiantly. She had expected him to let her up when the fox came, but he didn't, holding her down, even as the brown and red shape sniffed Pebblepaw's blood and prowled ever forward. "Foxdunged Mousebrain." Firbush spat at Darkpaw's face, eyes blazing wildly.

The fox looked up, right at the two cats, and Darkpaw felt cold fear shrill beneath her. *Huh! I thought you'd like seeing me attack Pebblepaw, but instead you want to kill me for it?* "Just let me go!" Darkpaw squirmed, and Firbush, to her surprise, let her up, and dashed into the bushes.

Am I going to die, like in my dream?! Darkpaw bolted away from the fox, fearing that it would give chase, but it seemed more interested in sniffing around Pebblepaw's fur which Darkpaw must have torn off the she-cat.

Darkpaw ran in the same direction, knowing that she would be at least safer with a warrior. *Even if it's Firbush?* She trailed the massive paw tracks he had left in the bank, and leaped over the small stream at the edge of the training area. She dodged through clumps of bracken, and into the towering oaks, where she met him on the border with Thunderclan territory. Darkpaw hid between a clump of small bracken bushes, but she almost jumped when she scented another cat... *ThunderClan?!*

Darkpaw pricked her ears, listening, she only heard snatches. "I... battles... getting worse... it's time?" That was Firbush's mew.

"Stop talking... on the horizon, mousebrain. The... stop it." That was a grey she-cat, who smelled of ThunderClan.

"Alright... do you... run." Firbush snapped.

Darkpaw watched as the grey ThunderClan she-cat raced away. She tried to stay hidden, but Firbush immediately rounded on her.

"Well, my apprentice," Firbush spat, "I think you've gotten yourself into a fine and dandy mess. It was you that probably brought that massive fox here, by drawing Pebblepaw's blood, and all the screeching that every cat made. Troutstar won't be pleased that you hurt his pet."

"Huh!" Darkpaw shot back, "I know you are another one of his devoted followers and pets too. You so much as whined to him about me, when I was a tiny kit getting a little out of line, so..." *Would he kill me if he knew I'd heard him talking to the ThunderClan cat? I won't say anything for now, but I'm watching you, Firbush.*

Firbush padded up to her, and Darkpaw realised that the massive warrior had been cornering her, in all her confusion and rage. "We don't really know each other that well, apprentice," he sneered, backing her into a rock, "I'm not as dull as you think I am. Hah! As an apprentice, I remember being a lot like you. Volatile. Competitive. Insecure." He flicked his tail over Darkpaw's face and she choked on his fur. "I let that shape who I was, as you will too someday soon, and now I'm too far gone to change the mistakes that I made, so I own my tendencies to anger now."

"I'm nothing like you," Darkpaw spat, unsheathing her claws.

Firbush shrugged, backing away to let her out of the corner he had trapped her in. "Yeah? Good one, kid. Have fun with Trout." Then Firbush was gone.

Darkpaw took the longest route she could think of on her way back to camp so that she could mull over the eventful day. Pebblepaw had been such a piece of mousedung at training, but Darkpaw still felt a prick of guilt about attacking her. *I wasn't trying to claw her, she just... got in the way,* Darkpaw tried to convince herself. Why was Pebblepaw so arrogant too? Darkpaw knew that the only reason she wasn't good at fighting was because Firbush trained her in fighting with claws entirely unsheathed, which made strategically placed blows deal more damage. The fox was a threat, but nothing the clan couldn't handle, surely? Firbush's words still rang in her head, but

he had to be lying. *We're not alike! I'll never cower before Troutstar like he does.*

When Darkpaw returned to camp, she found it in a state of stress and chaos, with several warriors pacing back and forth anxiously. *They're probably worried about the fox.* Darkpaw was about to go to her den to have a nice long sleep, when suddenly she found herself face-to-face with the clan leader. Pebblepaw was trembling behind him.

"Well, what do you have to say for yourself, Shadowpaw," Troutstar meowed to Darkpaw, casting a shadow on her. "What did you do?"

"Well, first of all, my name is Darkpaw," Darkpaw muttered mutinously, "and secondly... the whole Pebblepaw incident is an accident, I swear.

Pebblepaw walked up to Darkpaw, eyes upset. The black she-cat widened her eyes as she looked down at Pebblepaw. A trickle of dry blood ran down her face, from where a small part of her ear had been torn off. "You should get the blood cleaned up," she said bluntly.

"Wh-why did you do this, Darkpaw?" Pebblepaw was stammering, touching her broken ear, "I thought we were rivals, friends even."

"Friends mock each other's skills? Use each other as a way to lift up their already overinflated ego? I guess you're right then, we must be the best of friends," Darkpaw spat.

Pebblepaw looked miserably at the ground. "Do you all hate me? All the apprentices?"

Darkpaw was about to open her jaws to speak. When suddenly Troutstar flashed in front of Pebblepaw, blocking Darkpaw's view of her. "Stop it," he snarled. Darkpaw fluffed up her pelt. *It's just the truth. She's always been this arrogant.* Troutstar's eyes were blazing with fury, and before Darkpaw could react, he neatly tore off the tip of her own ear. "There. Now get lost," apprentice."

"You and Peb... What now?

Darkpaw was sitting in a well shaded spot just outside of camp, alongside Min, Thornpaw, Nightpaw, and Batpaw. She had just told the apprentices the entire story of Pebblepaw's ear's misfortunate story through her obviously less biased perspective. Min, who had been missing out on a lot of outside adventures, was struggling to take everything in.

"Yeah. Ears are kinda fragile and bleed a lot, it's honestly not that bad a wound," Thornpaw told the group, "Pebblepaw'll be fine, physically. Easy fix."

Min looked at her, "that's great Thor, but... why did you do it Dark? Peb's not the easiest kit to get along with, but still..."

Darkpaw sighed. "I've felt this way for a long time, Min. Pebblepaw has always been annoying, cocky, and unsociable, but it just boiled over here. I can't stand her; the way she holds herself, the way she talks to all of us like she's better than us, the way she doesn't care to talk to us about her troubles after a long day of training, instead flexing about her achievements. She's always out to make herself look good, and the rest of us bad in the eyes of Troutstar."

Nightpaw glanced at all the apprentices, and then shifted to speak to Darkpaw. "I don't think that's entirely fair, Darkpaw. She's not the most empathetic cat in the world, but I'm sure she tries. If we're kind to her," her brother mewed, "surely she'll be kind and open back eventually?"

Darkpaw acknowledged Nighpaw's sentiment with a half-hearted grunt. *My brother always saw too much good in Pebblepaw.*

"I, for one, agree with Darkpaw," Batpaw offered. He hadn't said anything this whole meeting, but now he spoke up. "But that doesn't mean anything. We're just here, like talking in circles... what's the point?"

Darkpaw sighed. "I just wanted to see if we're on common terms," she mewed to her friends.

As the meeting broke up between the apprentices, and they made their way back to camp, Nightpaw remained and glanced at

Darkpaw. "Your ear's good?" he mewed. As Darkpaw nodded, he added, "remember what I said when I was a kit?"

Darkpaw nudged him affectionately as the two of them walked back to camp. "You said quite a lot of things as a kit. Are you thinking of the time you said to Min and me '*Have you ever eaten snails, they're delightful?*" Darkpaw asked, pretending to be serious.

Nightpaw nudged her, "Nah," he said with a laugh, "Don't follow that advice, please. I meant that sentiment about how sometimes we make mistakes, and we shouldn't go too hard on each other for them."

Darkpaw touched her littermate's shoulder with her tail tip, "I'll remember," she promised softly.

"Thanks!" Then he was off bounding after his best friend, Min.

Darkpaw watched him, as the moon began to rise. *I'll remember it, but that doesn't mean I'll use that advice right now.* She walked toward her nest, and curled up for the night. *Yes,* she thought, *Pebblepaw doesn't need pity right now.*

Chapter 7

Chapter 7

"Let all cats gather around the swift river to hear my words!"

Pebblepaw jumped out of the apprentice's den to avoid having to talk to her denmates before they woke up, and eagerly padded toward the edge of camp where Troutstar had called the clan meeting. It had been a half of a moon since the training incident, and Pebblepaw was now painfully aware of the way her denmates seemed to avoid her, and Darkpaw seemed to glower at her. Shimmerclaw had encouraged her to talk to her denmates, but Pebblepaw had refused. *Were they always like this?*

"Gather! I don't have all day!" Pebblepaw raced towards Troutstar as he called a second summons to all the cats of the clan. She wondered what he had to say at the clan meeting. *Is he going to talk about how Thunderclan is still being aggressive? Or... maybe the fox? Please don't talk about my mess with the other apprentices,* she silently begged as she sat down at the front of the crowd, noting that the other apprentices kept to the back.

"It has been a difficult few moons for Riverclan..." Troutstar began.

"Yeah! No kidding!" Pebblepaw heard a voice that was very quickly hushed.

"Thunderclan and the fox have driven unease and insecurity straight into the heart of Riverclan. We must be strong and stand up to these fox-hearted attacks from the outside. We must not start a civil war! We must be united! Riverclan is at its strongest when we work together." Troutstar's voice boomed.

"Our clan is not falling apart!" An elderly voice called out.

"Yeah, and what of those apprentices who keep squabbling with each other?" another cat shot back.

Troutstar swished his tail decisively. "I have come to a solution," he announced proudly. "The Flame Trials, a series of friendly competitions between our young, to lighten the spirit of the clan. Named after our famous liberator, Flamestar, these trials will take place at sun down. The apprentice who wins the most trials will earn the suffix "flame" in their name."

Flamestar? Pebblepaw had heard little of the clan's so-called hero. Apparently she had saved the clan from evil spirit cats, or something. Every cat called her a hero, but no-one shared exactly the same story about her. *Flamestar and the spirit cats is probably a made up story, anyways,* Pebblepaw thought. No one cat could surely attack spirit cats?

"Are you excited for the Flame Trials, Pebblepaw?" Shimmerclaw asked as the two of them made their long journey back to camp, laden with prey.

"No," Pebblepaw admitted. "It sounds awful. All the other apprentices are jealous of me, and are going to beat me up."

Shimmerclaw looked back at her, a playful expression turning to one of solemn reflectiveness. "There are tons of cats who are cheering for you to win, Pebblepaw. It would be an honour. Besides, the other apprentices... they'll come around." She draped her tail over Pebblepaw's shoulders, as the two of them walked into camp.

A tom by the name of Mousefang walked up to the returning pair. "You're nearly late," he said. "Troutstar's waiting for you two before he starts the first trial."

Pebblepaw raced away, all her apprehension turning to nervous, eager energy as she bounded towards the other apprentices. Some other warriors had sat down nearby, casually watching the other apprentices.

"Swimming contest." Troutstar turned to her and rapidly explained the rules. "All of you are going to swim in the river against the currant up to that orange marker over there. He pointed with his paw, "okay, Pebblepaw? This competition is yours to win. Time to

prove what a great apprentice you are to those whiny 'paws."

Pebblepaw nodded. *This'll be easy.* She leaped in the water alongside the other apprentices, and the competition began.

She moved her small body to avoid the current, and splashed wildly to get the other apprentices off track. *When they hurt you, hurt them back! This is awesome!* Pebblepaw imagined the other apprentices floundering in the water behind her. Perhaps Nightpaw and Batpaw had to get out of the water, she was paddling so hard. Perhaps Darkpaw and Min would get swept away and she would be the only one to even finish the competition. 'At record time!' Troutstar would tell her.

Through the river, she saw Thornpaw running along the bank. The medicine cat apprentice had decided against being part of the competition since she didn't have as many warrior skills. *She's cheering for my epic finish!*

As Pebblepaw splashed her way to the finish line, she let out a triumphant caterwaul. She imagined her denmates faces. They would surely want to be friends with such a speedy and cool cat.

As she stopped her wild splashing, and finally took her sights to the finish line, her jaw dropped. Nightpaw was already there, and Min was swimming in just a second or two behind her own finish. Darkpaw and Batpaw finished slightly later on.

Before anycat announced the winner, Pebblepaw heard Batpaw hiss to Darkpaw. "How were we supposed to do, like, a fair race when she's all splashy and over the place."

He's jealous of my thinking skills, Pebblepaw thought happily, *maybe I could teach him how to do it.*

"The winner is Nightpaw!" Shimmerclaw announced brightly, and all the apprentices made their way out of the river.

Pebblepaw turned to him, and Min, who had finished so close to her, "how'd you guys beat me and nearly beat me and my swimming skills?" She asked irritably.

Min hesitated, but Nightpaw mewed, "honestly, I've just got good fur for swimming, and Min and I love to swim every single day together. But... uh, you did really well Pebblepaw."

I know, I'm just not a second place cat, Pebblepaw thought bitterly.

Min blinked at her. "The key to understanding the river is to be the river." She began moving her paws as though trying to mimic waves. "Then, you will grasp the full potential of the beast!"

Darkpaw rounded on the two apprentices, "why are you talking to her," she hissed, "Pebblepaw's probably just trying to find a way to fix her bruised ego.

Is she right? Pebblepaw wasn't sure she wanted to know the answer. As the rest of the apprentices padded away from her, Nightpaw turned and gave her a small rueful smile. "Don't worry," he mewed, "Darkpaw's a bit hard to befriend, and I know that all the apprentices do what she says, but I trust you, Pebblepaw. Darkpaw will soon as well, she's probably just going through a lot right now too."

"Pebblepaw, I know yesterday was rough for you," Shimmerclaw mewed. "But Troutstar and I have some important leadership business to attend to, and I need you to stay in camp for the day. Remember: with the fox around no apprentices are allowed out of camp without a warrior."

Pebblepaw dipped her head, knowing that Shimmerclaw wanted her to do the elders' bedding, and replace the moss in the warrior's den while she was out. This was the disadvantage of having a mentor that was so important to the rest of the clan. She sometimes had other duties to attend to that meant Pebblepaw had to stay in camp.

Watching the other apprentices pad out of camp with their own mentors made Pebblepaw feel lonely. She knew that this was going to be a long day. Even worse, she would have to talk to the elders about her failure yesterday. Pebblepaw let out a miserable sigh, *how can this day get any worse?*

It was long past sunhigh by the time the other apprentices padded into camp, laughing amongst each other. Even the medicine cat apprentice, Thornpaw had gotten the opportunity to get some hunting practice in. *All the apprentices hate me, and I don't know what to do about it.*

Throughout the day, Pebblepaw had been trying to come up with a plan to befriend her denmates. She had come up with the idea of trying to get closer with Nightpaw first, as he seemed the most friendly and normal of the bunch. While she had cleaned out the disgusting nests, she had decided that recklessness must be a feature in a cat that the other apprentices found attractive. They were always egging each other on to do mousebrained stunts. *I'm not reckless, but... if I become reckless they'll surely like me more.* She planned to take Nightpaw out on a hunt, even though it was illegal with the fox out.

"Heeeey, Nightpaw," she yowled to get his attention. Darkpaw scowled at her, but Nightpaw blinked, and bounded over to her. "I have this really awesome idea that we should go out, just the two of us, and go hunting together."

Nightpaw fluffed up his fur, emotions of fear whirling in her eyes. For a brief, fearful second, she wondered if he would decline since they were breaking rules. Eventually he mewed, "Sure... an adventure sounds fun. So long as you're not taking me out to get eaten by a fox!"

Pebblepaw rolled her eyes. "No, I just want to hunt."

The sun had just begun to set, as Pebblepaw bounded over the ridge and pounced, catching a sparrow in her jaws. "Awesome catch!" Nightpaw mewed to her.

Pebblepaw bounded back to him, grinning around the sparrow in her jaws. "That makes three pieces of prey!" she announced.

Nightpaw wasn't listening anymore. He was padding softly towards a hollowed out tree, where there seemed to be a vague reek of fox. "Huh. ominous." he mewed fearfully.

This is my chance to dare Nightpaw to do a reckless thing so we can secure our new friendship! Pebblepaw thought to herself, recollecting all the reckless stunts he and Min had done together as kits. "Race you inside!" she called, bounding into the empty den. *Besides, it's not like the fox lives here, it probably hasn't been here in moons.*

The den was dark, and Pebblepaw suddenly caught a whiff of rotting freshkill. "Pebblepaw, no!" Nightpaw screeched.

Suddenly, Pebblepaw caught the fresh, sharp, rotting stench of a fox that had been masked by the sparrow in her jaws. She instantly dropped the bird, as the shadow of a fox crept closer, and closer. Suddenly, it was blocking the escape of the hollow!

The fox darted toward her, its jaws salivating just as Pebblepaw's own had done over her sparrow. *It's going to put ME on it's freshkill pile!* As it lunged toward her, Pebblepaw saw a shape bolt into the den, which knocked her out of the way. *A patrol?!*

She slid across the den, wincing as sharp rocks cut into her fur and sent blades of agony through her body. When she stood up, she realised that the cat who had pushed her out of the way wasn't an entire patrol, but instead Nightpaw. He stared back at her, and she widened her eyes at the gash the fox had landed on his neck. Blood was pulsing out.

As though Nightpaw didn't realise any of the peril that he was in, he leaped at the massive, scarred fox again, scoring his claws down its dark black eyes. The fox squealed in pain and threw him to the back of the den. His head landed painfully against the wall, but he still got up.

Pebblepaw threw herself at the fox, lashing out wildly. Nightpaw too, leaped back at the fox. Together, the two of them teamed up, protecting each other from the fox's massive paws. With a gigantic leap, Nightpaw grasped the fox's neck and bit down hard. The fox let out a forlorn yowl, and it stumbled away, bleeding, into the forest. Pebblepaw knew by how much blood the fox was losing, that it would find itself a dark hole, and die of its wounds soon.

Nightpaw leaned against her, and Pebblepaw felt dark liquid seep

into her pelt. With him leaning heavily on her, they made their way out of the den, where they both fell to the earth, panting.

It was the first time that Pebblepaw was able to fully take in the injuries that Nightpaw had all over his flank. Their were gashes all over his body, varying in length, but what made her let out a gasp of terror was the one on his neck, which was rapidly spilling blood. "You need help..." she began.

Nightpaw's eyes were glazed. "No," he murmured. "Just get my friends, I want... I only want to see them now," his words slurred together.

Pebblepaw glanced at him, and ran back towards camp. *Maybe Min or Thornpaw knows what to do,* she tried to ration, *everything has to be fine.* The sky was blood red, with streaks of dark orange as she raced across Riverclan territory towards camp. Her own injuries felt like nothing compared to how Nightpaw must feel. She would be glad when Frostbark could patch up his wounds. An image of her father with a similar wound flashed through her mind, and she instantly shook it away. *No!*

By the time she reached camp, the sun had almost set, and deep calming lines of purple and blue were etched across the sky. Pebblepaw sneaked into camp, and darted straight to the apprentices den, where all the young cats lay asleep.

She nudged each one of them in turn, until they were all staring at her with bleary, half-asleep eyes. She kicked Batpaw, hoping that the whole lot of them would move faster.

"What's it?" he muttered.

"Peb!" Min began, "what's going on, where were the three of you?"

Pebblepaw suddenly noticed that Darkpaw wasn't among the sleeping cats. She had no time to answer Min's question, let alone find Darkpaw before...

"Just follow me, and don't let anyone see you."

"That's kinda creepy, Peb." Min offered, but the three apprentices

darted out of the den sprinting to catch up with Pebblepaw.

Pebblepaw explained on the way what had happened. She had struggled to tell her denmates about the extent of Nightpaw's injuries, and had instead tried to skim over it. *Thornpaw will know what to do when we get there,* Pebblepaw hoped.

It was getting dark by the time the quartet of young cats reached the place where Pebblepaw had left Nightpaw to rest. He was still there, but surrounded by a pool of blood that glowed eerily in the moonlight. All the cats around Pebblepaw let out fearful gasps, and Min raced toward Nightpaw, nudging him.

"We need you home, Peb told me what happened, stand up Night, oh please just stand up," Min seemed desperate as she nudged Nightpaw, his blood soaking into her own pelt.

"It's fine Min," Nightpaw wheezed out. "You'll be fine. Everything will be fine. Calm down."

"How can it be fine without...?" Min couldn't meet his pained eyes.

Nightpaw turned to her. "Come closer," he murmured, gesturing with the tip of his tail to all the other cats.

Pebblepaw padded closer to her maybe new friend. He looked in worse shape than when she had left him, and she wasn't sure how any cat could still be alive having lost so much blood. "I couldn't find Darkpaw," she butted in. "I wanted to get as many cats to you before..."

Nightpaw sighed softly, then turned to each of the cats and spoke, "Thornpaw, remember not to lose yourself in your job. Take free time. Batpaw, remember to speak your mind. Pebblepaw, remember you're doing just fine."

He turned to Min, and let out a breath, "Min... be yourself, forever."

Nightpaw looked to the dark, night sky. "I have a brother and a sister waiting for me. I know we'll see each other again, someday.

Min buried her head in his pelt, as Nightpaw collapsed to the

ground, and his head rolled. "He told me to be myself," Min whispered, tears streaming down her face which she had buried into Nightpaw's fur, "but how can I do that when he is everything to me.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8

Darkpaw didn't find out until the next day. She and Firbush had gone out for 'moonlight training,' which resulted in two tired cats staggering into camp with small cuts and wounds all over their bodies. When Darkpaw had found Batpaw in camp, he had tried to explain the encounter with the fox. Instead of listening, Darkpaw had stared blankly at the tom, as though his words meant nothing to her, and stumbled into her nest, desperate for sleep.

When she woke up, midday light was streaming into the apprentice's den. She blinked blearily, her whole body aching from her training with Firbush. *At least I gave him that nasty ear swipe.* As her eyes adjusted to the den, she noticed Pebblepaw sitting forlornly at the back of the den, long scratches covering her body. As Darkpaw shifted in her nest, Pebblepaw looked at her, with round red eyes.

"I'm sorry!" She gasped, irritating as always. "I did-didn't mean it".

Darkpaw blinked in confusion at her denmate. Pebblepaw had clearly just been crying, and the once green moss around her was torn and red. Her breath was coming out in shallow rasps, as she turned her head uneasily to look directly at Darkpaw. Pebblepaw's paws trembled beneath her, as Pebblepaw turned away from Darkpaw, to continue staring forlornly at the den wall. *Nothing new there,* Darkpaw thought resentfully.

She turned as Thornpaw bustled into the den, holding a mash of different scented herbs. Frostbark poked his head into the den, eyes narrowed at Pebblepaw, then walked away. Thornpaw didn't look at her, eyes fixed on Pebblepaw as she applied the dressing. "What is going on?" Darkpaw snapped, feeling oddly scared.

Thornpaw blinked at her and sighed. "Just working. You can control that at least," she muttered half to herself, and padded towards

Pebblepaw.

Darkpaw twitched her ears with uncertainty. She was suddenly painfully aware of the quiet, solemn mood outside the den, the way cats talked in quiet, hushed, fearful whispers.

"All is lost."

"-killed the fox?"

"Times like this, I wish I could slice..."

Darkpaw hesitated before bounding out of the apprentices den into the crisp morning light. Everything felt *wrong.* Cats were huddled in clusters, talking amongst themselves. She noted her mother, Lilacstorm, crouched in a ball, letting out high-pitched screeches of agony. Darkpaw turned in the direction of Troutstar's den, and then she saw it.

The thing that had gotten everyone on edge. The reason why Pebblepaw had been crying. The thing that had once been a cat she had loved, lying motionless and broken.

It was then that Darkpaw raced towards the shape, and collapsed into the grass, her breath ragged. Her thoughts swam as she buried herself into the bloodied hide of her brother. Black fur on black fur, she lay with him until her eyes closed, and she let sleep claim her.

"Huh. Thought you were tougher than that..."

Darkpaw rounded on the shape who had spoken to her. A tom lay in the shadows, flicking his tail to and fro as he looked at her. Darkpaw instantly bolted upright and addressed her surroundings.

She turned to the tom who had addressed him. "Who are you, and what foxdung do you want with me?"

He merely laughed at her, as though she was a kit tripping over her tail. "Nice to finally talk to you too, Darkie." He looked into what Darkpaw thought was empty space, and growled. "Get out." To Darkpaw, he mewed, "we'll talk again soon."

Darkpaw looked up to see Frostbark of all cats nudging her sharply. His ice-blue eyes were dark and stormy, and he grunted as he looked at Darkpaw. As he turned away, Darkpaw thought she heard him mutter under his breath. "And so the end has begun!"

"Today we gather to mourn the loss of a young warrior."

Darkpaw blinked as Troutstar called the summons to begin Nightpaw's vigil. She had spent most of the day padding forlornly around camp, as other cats gave her pitying looks.

Nightpaw's body lay in the middle of camp, dressed in golden and lilac flowers so that none of his scratches from the fox encounter were visible. Darkpaw had spent the whole day trying to pretend like Nightpaw wasn't gone. She imagined that perhaps he was out hunting, or patrolling the border.

Now, though, as the blazing sunset sky seemed to darken and settle into night, Darkpaw felt flashes of anger burn through her, like she was on fire. She had heard the full story with the fox, and knew that it was Pebblepaw's fault. It was her mousebrained choices that had led him to his demise. Pebblepaw, who had gone against the rules to even go out hunting. Pebblepaw, who had jumped into a fox den as eagerly as though it was a prey-rich river. Pebblepaw, who Nightpaw had literally had to push out of the way to save her from death. *It has to be her fault; my brother shouldn't have died in vain.*

In her mind, the answer to all her questions was simple. Pebblepaw didn't deserve to be in Riverclan. She needed to be driven out. Just like ticks on the elders, she had preyed on Nightpaw's good naturedness and amiable personality. She had killed him.

"He was a good cat. He will be missed."

Darkpaw looked up. She had been momentarily lost in her own thoughts, but now she heard Pebblepaw's voice. Her voice quavered as she spoke, her usually blunt and fearless eyes stormy. Darkpaw felt anger burn in her pelt as Pebblepaw looked up at her with pity and tears. *If anyone deserves to grieve for my brother, it's me- not mouse-brained Pebblepaw. And what right does she have to pity me of*

all things!

Pebblepaw swept her tail as she padded over to sit down beside Darkpaw. Realising now that she had to say something honorary about Nightpaw at the vigil, Darkpaw mustered up the words, "My brother was the best cat I ever knew. He was my best friend. I will forever mourn his death at... at the paws of a mouse-brained cat."

Darkpaw heard cats gasp around her, but she didn't care. She whirled around, her eyes narrowed on Pebblepaw, as she prepared to leap and sink her claws into the grey she-cat's neck. *I want her to feel like I feel.* Pebblepaw darted away, but Darkpaw managed to dig claws into her leg, and the two of them tumbled toward the river, and the edge of camp.

"What are you doing?" Pebblepaw half-squealed half shrieked as Darkpaw dug her claws into her leg.

Pebblepaw was still weak from the fox attack, and Darkpaw knew that she was stronger now, after training with Firbush. But Pebblepaw was more accurate now too. She landed a hard blow that Darkpaw wouldn't have expected from such a small she-cat. She landed a second that was so hard that Darkpaw was carried off her paws.

She tumbled into the river, and her head collided with a rock, which sent a sharp shrill of pain through Darkpaw's body. River water streamed into her nostrils, as Darkpaw felt the world fall away from her and everything went black.

"Well. *That* was indeed mouse-brained ."

Darkpaw looked up, stumbling slightly in the darkness that seemed to encase her entire body. She moved sluggishly, lashing out a paw to face whoever this intruder was. Her muscles ached, and she felt as though someone had clawed half her pelt off.

"Open your eyes, my sweet."

That was a second voice. Darkpaw blinked open her eyes in confusion. She swayed slightly on her paws. RiverClan's forest. It

was the same as it had always been but yet somehow different.

She turned, realising that the cats who had been speaking to her were behind her. She turned around slowly. Her eyes widened, and her jaws gaped open as she saw the two shapes that stood before her, serene and smug.

The first of the two was a massive tom glowing blue tom, who she realised she had seen before. Only now, his claws were unsheathed and he seemed to tower over her even more. Darkpaw didn't tremble often, but now, she did. He blinked at her and gave her a small smile, which was, perhaps, even more terrifying. His teeth were sharp and pointy, and she felt a sudden conviction that he could probably swallow her whole.

The second was a lanky, tall she-cat, whose fur shimmered more white than blue. Her eyes were ice-blue, and she had a generally more friendly approach. Except... her front right paw was smeared with dark red blood.

Run! Every instinct told Darkpaw to flee the sight, but the tom blocked her, widening his eyes in mock pity.

"Is the little kitty scared? Of us... or of *that."* It was the massive tom who spoke. He pointed one unsheathed claw at a bundle of black fur which lay by the river bank, face covered in blood. Firbush stood over the shape, wet and breathing heavily. Thornpaw was panicking, trying to figure out what to do, being the only semi-qualified healer in sight.

"Shut it, mousebrain," the she-cat spoke now. "Sorry for my friend's harshness. Earthquake is what you might call, a little bit of a show off." She leaned over and whispered to Darkpaw, "he's a skilled warrior, and massive, but not the brightest light in the forest, if you get what I mean. As for your earth-body," she gestured to the motionless black shape. "It'll be fine. If not, you can be a true one of us, which certainly has its benefits."

Darkpaw opened her jaws, and closed them, flabbergasted. She felt shrills of panic and fear spread throughout her to the extent that she needed to momentarily lay down. *One of us?* That sounded

ominous. As she was desperately trying to regain her composure, the she-cat opened her jaws to speak.

"I understand you have certain... feelings toward Pebblepaw? As it happens, we do too."

Darkpaw realised that she hadn't even spoken to the spirit cats yet. She had been too busy staring at her body, trying to puzzle out what was wrong. When the cats spoke of Pebblepaw, though, her fur bushed up and she got defensive of her thoughts towards the mousebrain. "Pebblepaw doesn't deserve Riverclan," she said simply.

Darkpaw suddenly felt a bolt of agony sear across her face, and she swayed on her paws which buckled beneath her.

The she-cat looked up sharply. "The truth is, Darkpaw, we need you to be a messenger of sorts. Pebblepaw is a fire that needs to be extinguished for the safety of RiverClan. She killed your brother, and almost killed you. This is our message. Pebblepaw needs to..."

Darkpaw suddenly woke up from her unconsciousness, hacking up water. Firbush looked indifferent. Thornpaw looked immensely relieved, but all Darkpaw heard was one word ringing in her head. She didn't know if it had come out of the mouths of the spirit cats, or her own, or perhaps all three of them. *Disappear.*

Chapter 9

Chapter 9

Pebblepaw heard Darkpaw's screech which was abruptly cut off as the she-cat was swept down the river. She wanted to jump in the river, but her flanks were heaving with the exertion of the mini-fight, and she let Frostbark guide her into the medicine den.

"Might have opened up that big wound again," Frostbark muttered irritably, "Come on, sit."

Pebblepaw was trembling, bile in her mouth. The world didn't feel real, as though everything was spiralling out of control. She let out a gasp, and winced in pain as Frostbark slapped a poultice on her side.

The old medicine cat sighed. "Lay down, Pebblepaw," he snapped at her.

Pebblepaw lay down obediently on her side, and Frostbark gave her a disgusting mixture to lap up. Pebblepaw let out a gusty sigh. Frostbark looked at her sharply, and proceeded to lay down beside her.

"Look. You're a mess." he said bluntly "I've been through it, too. Know what it's like to be beaten and alone. But," his voice trailed away, "it gets better. You just gotta keep on pushing. Keep on surviving, kit. Keep on keepin' on."

He let out a trembling gasp, but Pebblepaw understood what he was saying. Frostbark didn't say much, and when he did speak it was almost always a sharp retort. Pebblepaw had never seen him be vulnerable, and yet... she could see what he was trying to tell her. As her eyelids closed and she let sleep come in, Pebblepaw let her muscles relax. *I'll try...?* She thought uneasily. *But how can I keep fighting after everything?*

Pebblepaw stretched her jaws and took a massive yawn. It had been almost a half moon since her and Nightpaw's encounter with the fox, and yet, she still felt miserable. It had taken time for her wounds with the fox to recover, and for the past half moon she had generally been in camp doing odd jobs. Shimmerclaw hadn't minded, since her and Troutstar were keenly focussed on taking back territory from ThunderClan.

"Hiya Pebblepaw! Lovely day for a lovely yawn, ain't it."

Pebblepaw turned to see Carptuft padding up to her, a relaxed smile on his fluffy face. "Yes... I mean, I guess." Pebblepaw responded.

She bustled away, but Carptuft still wanted to talk to her. "Hey. So about that epic vole you caught yesterday... I ate it!"

Pebblepaw rounded on her clanmate. "This isn't productive," she hissed. "Look, just leave me alone."

The massive tom shrugged awkwardly and moved off. Pebblepaw sighed inwardly. Ever since that fateful day with the fox, her clanmates had started treating her differently. Some, like Snowflight and elder Birchforest, looked at her with round, pitying eyes. Some, like Carptuft and Mousefang, were impressed by her recklessness. Then there was Darkpaw, who looked at her, from the medicine den, as though she very much wanted to slit Pebblepaw's throat.

Pebblepaw sighed inwardly, her mind flicking back to the day Darkpaw had fallen in the river. She had heard from Thornpaw that Darkpaw had been fished out by Firbush. On gut instinct alone, Thornpaw had managed to pump the water out of the she-cat's lungs. When Firbush carried the semi-conscious shape of Darkpaw to the medicine den, Pebblepaw instantly recalled being vaguely awake. Firbush had laid down Darkpaw and darted out of the den. All that Pebblepaw remembered was Frostbark whirling around, immense disappointment on his face as he looked at the half alive form of Darkpaw.

"Foxdung! Watch it apprentice." Pebblepaw whirled around to see the face of Spikewillow glowering back at her.

Pebblepaw sighed inwardly, but Spikewillow wasn't finished with her insults yet. "Stop following me like a helpless kit. Back off!"

Looking into the angry face of her mother, Pebblepaw was instantly aware of how they hadn't talked at all since she'd been made an apprentice over three moons ago. She dropped her gaze, and padded away without saying a word, but Spikewillow still wasn't finished. "Did'ya hear, insignificant apprentice? Troutstar and Streamclaw are having kits, meaning that good old Trout will push you out of his way like an annoying gnat. He's going to have even closer blood-related "heirs" to his leadership now."

With that Spikewillow was off, and Pebblepaw felt something like guilt crawl over her. Her and Troutstar hadn't talked in a while about her potential leadership; she'd been too caught up in other affairs. Perhaps he didn't think she was worthy now that Darkpaw was attacking her every chance the black she-cat got. *Being leader now, after everything? I don't know how fun it would be anymore.*

"H-hey have you seen Minnowpaw?" Pebblepaw turned to see the round deep blue eyes of Snowflight. "I haven't seen her in a few days, so I wondered..."

Pebblepaw, mixed with whirling emotions, found herself snapping at the she-cat. "Well, have you tried *looking* for her?"

Snowflight scratched at the ground awkwardly. "Erm, no. I thought she probably could use some time alone after..."

Irritated, and anxious, and feeling like a general wreck, Pebblepaw snapped at the she-cat a second time. "Fine and dandy. I'll search for her then."

Instantly she regretted her outburst, but Snowflight merely nodded anxiously. "Okay. A friend is probably what she needs right now And, Pebblepaw, just so you know patrols have scented a large group of foxes just off our territory..."

A friend. Pebblepaw was sure she was anything but, though she bolted out of camp, hoping to find Min, and maybe help her out.

As Pebblepaw ran, she tasted the air, trying to pick up a whiff of something. One advantage to tracking Min was that she had a very distinct scent. It was the scent of everything she enjoyed collecting and bringing to the apprentices' den. Bird's eggs, water reeds, crow feathers, and pretty much everything in between all mashed together to make up one cat's scent trail.

As Pebblepaw had expected, Min's trail was easy to find. Though, it was stale. She knew Min liked to go on adventures, sometimes for full days at a time, but she always came back. This time she hadn't. It made since, that Snowflight, Min's mentor, hadn't worried on the first day, but now, even Pebblepaw felt anxiety shrill through her.

As she ran, Pebblepaw's mind flicked back to the last time she had been this far out of camp. It had been with Nightpaw. As soon as she'd had that thought, she'd stopped thinking, and merely focussed on her small paws, racing ahead.

There it was, Min's scent trail, getting stronger now. Pebblepaw had already crossed the border into no clan's land. She sniffed the ground, and instantly knew something was wrong. There was the faint reek of blood, and the scent of foxes. Then, Pebblepaw saw Min and bounded toward her.

Min met her with a snarl. *Valid,* Pebblepaw thought inwardly. "You can't stop me now," Min hissed.

"S-stop you?" Pebblepaw managed out, amidst her confusion.

"Yes. I'm going to kill the family of five foxes that's around here, to avenge my best friend's death."

Her words felt wrong. Everything about this felt wrong, Min couldn't fight foxes, for Starclan's sake!

"Why?" Pebblepaw asked, "What'd those random foxes do to deserve your claws?" She knew deep down that it was *her own* fault.

Min looked at her, as though she hadn't exactly expected that response to come from Pebblepaw's mouth. Instead of snarling back savagely, her tail drooped, and she suddenly looked seasons older.

"Because, I have to do something, Peb. It was such a mouseybrained way to go out. Even if the foxes get me, I'll be better off, because I'll... maybe see him again."

Pebblepaw felt shards of anger pierce through her pelt and Min's depressed, yet valiant face. "No," she whispered. "Me instead. It's all my fault. Darkpaw knows it, I know it, you know it," she sighed. "Even Nightpaw probably knows it."

Min leaped at her, but her claws didn't pierce Pebblepaw's throat, releasing blood. Instead, a different liquid ran down her neck. Tears. Min's tears.

"No, no no!" Min managed to get out. "It's not true, Peb. It was an accident. No cat deserves to feel tortured in the aftermath of it. You need to think about this, Peb."

"Listen to yourself, Min," Pebblepaw managed out under Min's fluffy pelt, which still pinned her to the ground.

The weight was instantly lifted. Min looked at her with round, tearfilled eyes. She felt like Pebblepaw's mirror. Tentatively at first, then more fiercely, the two she-cats embraced. Pebblepaw cared for this cat, all the apprentices really. She hadn't realised just how much, though, until now. *I'm never letting you go. Even if you fight back. Not because I want to be clan leader, but because* I *care.*

"Peb?" Min began as the two she-cats made their way home, eyes still red. "I'm not sure if we-you... Can we be friends?" She forced out.

"Friends?" Pebblepaw echoed.

"Yes! Cats who care for each other, spend time together, play together, and cry together," Min explained simply.

"I'd like that alot."

Chapter 10

Chapter 10

"So... you understand the plan? You'll follow through?"

Darkpaw shifted her paws uneasily as she stared up at the circle of spirit cats that encompassed her. While she had been sleeping, she had been 'summoned' to their dwelling place. About twelve cats of varying sizes and colours stood around her in a circle. Some looked mean, while others looked bored or vaguely friendly.

She was in their land now, an open moortop that was bright and vibrant. Various colours flashed around her vision. At the bottom of the hill she was sitting on, there appeared to be a dark, gloomy forest full of shadow, with towering black trees.

"Darkpaw! Listen you mousebrain!" Darkpaw scowled at the she-cat who spoke to her.

"Yeah, yeah. You want me to kill some rogue cat I've never even heard of." Darkpaw found the spirit cats to be significantly less friendly now that she'd come to their realm a few times. *Not really the best way to impress me to join your side, guys.*

Hisses and scowls exploded from the semi-circle of cats around her, as Darkpaw spoke confidently and defiantly. Even the 'friendly' cats were staring at her with narrowed eyes. A massive tom she remembered as Earthstar looked about to leap at her with unsheathed claws when the she-cat spoke again.

"Darkpaw, dearest, you are so young and foolish. I understand you feel weak, and uncertain of going on a massive quest. For that reason, I have given you a life goal that will be... simpler for a cat of your ability to accomplish."

Darkpaw tipped her head to one side, and blinked innocently. "And what might that be?" She asked.

"Kill Pebblepaw." All the spirit cats seemed to speak in unison, and Darkpaw smiled with all her teeth. That was a task she could certainly achieve.

"Earthstar will check your progress every quarter moon, dearest Darkpaw. Don't disappoint," the she-cat spoke again, and Darkpaw nodded.

This was a task that she had wanted to do ever since Pebblepaw had padded into camp with her brother's blood on her flank. She hadn't been certain at first that it was the right decision, but with the spirit cats all in agreement, Darkpaw couldn't help but feel encouraged. She would avenge her brother's death! Then the claws that pierced her heart from the second she woke up would let go. The world could return to normal. One cat's blood for the security of the clan and a small bit of vengeance. *It's normal to want vengeance. We're warrior cats, after all. We fight, sometimes cats die. Pebblepaw will be fine rolling around in StarClan, really.*

The spirit world was shifting away from her vision, the cat's shapes paleing. All the cats raise their voices to chant in Darkpaw's mind. "Kill Pebblepaw! Kill Pebblepaw!" Darkpaw grinned, and fell into a deeper sleep.

"Uh... hey." Some cat was prodding Darkpaw in her side.

She let out a grunt, trying desperately to hold onto a dream she had just had. Nightpaw and her had been running through the forest together, flanks heaving with exertion. They had run over rolling hills, past tall pines, until they couldn't run anymore. Then, the two of them had curled up together. Darkpaw could remember Nightpaw's soothing voice, telling her that everything would be alright.

"Come on, come on!" That was Firbush's voice. "Batpaw, are you so useless that you can't even wake up a sleeping denmate."

The prodding hesitated for a second, and Darkpaw hoped that Batpaw had given up trying to wake her. *Those meetings with the spirit cats always tire me out.* Suddenly, there was an extremely sharp jab in her side, and Darkpaw let out a hiss of pain.

"Unnecessary!" she snarled just as she opened her eyes to look at Batpaw.

The tall white and grey tom flicked his ears uneasily. "Firbush's orders..." he managed, then added apologetically, "yeah. Sorry, Darkpaw."

Darkpaw took a second to adjust to the gloomy warmth of the apprentice's den. All the other mossy nests had been vacated, and only Darkpaw and Batpaw remained in the den. She merely bared her teeth at him, and padded out of the den.

As her eyes adjusted to the bright light outside the den, she nearly collided with Firbush, who let out a hiss of frustration.

"Lousy apprentice," he muttered irritably. "Come on, the others are already at the training clearing for the Flame Trial."

Firbush started to pad away into the thorn barrier that lined the camp wall. "Flame Trial?" Darkpaw echoed blearily.

"Do you ever listen to anything I say," Firbush snarled. "Flame Trial. Troutstar will be there."

Firbush looked at her with such irritation in his expression, that he was almost amusing to look at. As Troutstar padded up to them from the nursery den, where his mate had just had her one kit, he looked up at Firbush. "Any problems?" he asked irritably. "You woke up my darling Thrushkit."

As Troutstar padded towards Firbush at the den entrance, Firbush instantly straightened and changed his composure. "No problems, sir," the brown tabby spoke confidently. "Just preparing my apprentice for the Flame Trial today.

Troutstar merely nodded and padded past him out of camp. Firbush filed out obediently behind Troutstar. Darkpaw hung back a little before following them both out of camp; she couldn't help but let out a chuckle that the word 'darling' had come out of Troutstar's mouth.

As Darkpaw padded into the forest, trees dappled with newleaf

sunshine, she heard pawsteps behind. She wheeled around, slipping on some bright green moss that was underneath her paws. She fell, unceremoniously onto her side, and looked into the amber eyes of Batpaw.

"Were you trying to hurt me?" she hissed at him.

Batpaw's eyes widened and the white and grey tom offered her a paw, but Darkpaw batted it away with unsheathed claws. Batpaw winced slightly as she drew blood. *He deserves it,* she thought to herself. *He'll forget about it soon anyway, nothing ever stays in the head of that massive tom for long!*

As she got to her paws, Batpaw spoke. "Er... Darkpaw?" He began slowly.

"Get on with it," she muttered.

She padded ahead of him, and Batpaw had to race to catch up. They were going to be late anyway, and Darkpaw thought it would be easier to explain her tardiness if Batpaw arrived even later.

She slowed her pace sufficiently for Batpaw to catch up. His ears twitched uneasily as he padded closer to Darpaw. "Darkpaw I don't really... appreciate your meanness towards Pebblepaw?" He said it as though it was a question.

Darkpaw swished her tail, encouraging Batpaw to continue through slitted eyes. Batpaw took a deep breath and restarted his 'speech'. "I guess I'm sort of a follower, you know? I like to let other cats take the lead."

Darkpaw let out a short mrow of laughter. "You think of me as your leader?" she asked, allowing a small amount of amusement to come into her voice. The tom *had* always sort of looked to her for direction.

Batpaw leaped over a protruding root. "As a little kit, yes. To be honest, Darkpaw, I was kinda sorta head over paws for you when I was two moons old. You *were* just so confident, so cool." He rushed the last part out quickly, then continued. "I like to follow, I like to

let other cats talk, and listen to what they have to say. But what I don't like is the way you bully Pebblepaw." He took a sharp inhale, "I may have sometimes find her antics... annoying, but she's really growing into an empathetic cat..."

Darkpaw cut him off. They were nearing the training hollow now. She brushed through a thick wad of leaves, and spoke. "So... your point? Are you threatening me?"

Batpaw sighed, "I just want you to be careful. I want you to know that I'm not that little kit anymore. I don't want to obediently follow any cat who speaks with confidence."

Darkpaw rounded on him. "Fine by me," she hissed and ran quickly towards the training hollow.

She felt Batpaw's impenetrable gaze on her tail as she whisked out of his sight. *Huh,* she thought. *What a weirdo.*

"Ready, set, go!"

Shimmerclaw's voice ran out to begin the tracking contest. Darkpaw fluffed out her fur, and narrowed her eyes. The apprentices had been split up into two separate teams. To even out the numbers, since Thornpaw wanted to test out her tracking, newish warrior Basstail had been added to the competition. Darkpaw had always disliked the silver and black tabby she-cat, who acted as though she was a powerful, dominant, senior warrior. It was often that she'd be telling the apprentices off for one thing or another, even though she had been promoted to a warrior less than five moons ago.

The point of the competition was to use all tracking skills to search for members of the opposite team. The catch was that the searching cats had to close their eyes and rely solely on scent and smell. The hiding team had to choose one spot within a set perimeter, and stay there for the whole match. Darkpaw had been teamed up with Thornpaw and Basstail of all cats. *Great. The dominant jerk and the Medicine Cat apprentice.*

Basstail spoke somewhere amidst the darkness of Darkpaw's closed eyelids. "Follow me! Quit tripping over my tail, Thornpaw!

Darkpaw, where in StarClan's name are you!" she shouted out random orders.

There was a muffled,"Sorr-eee," which sounded like Thornpaw.

Darkpaw shut off all the senses of the other mousebrained cats, and focused on one scent trail, which smelled of Pebblepaw. She started tracking it, then heard pawsteps behind her, and felt a massive block of muscle whamming into her.

"Safety precautions," Firbush muttered under his breath.

"Yeah, sure it is," Darkpaw muttered mutinously.

She opened her jaws to taste the air, and sure enough she could scent Pebblepaw.

Tripping unceremoniously over a root, Darkpaw swore under her breath. She was sure she heard Firbush muffling a laugh. She scowled, wanting to lash out at him, but focused instead on Pebblepaw's scent trail, drawing ever closer.

"Got me!" Darkpaw heard the distant mew of Min, but turned her senses forward and toward Pebblepaw.

After a few more pawsteps, Darkpaw heard a sound that was somewhere between the squealing of a dying mouse and the rough laughter of an amused cat. Relying on sound alone now, Darkpaw jumped a crisscross of ferns and nearly collided with a bramble bush.

The sound was coming from inside the bramble bush. The scent trail ended here. Darkpaw got into an attack position, unsheathed her claws, and leaped forward.

"Ack! Darkpaw..." That was very clearly Pebblepaw's mew.

"Pebblepaw's been found!" Firbush raised his voice.

"Ok!" That was Shimmerclaw's distant mew.

Darkpaw opened her eyes to look down at Pebblepaw. She was

laying in a ball, underneath Darkpaw's unsheathed claws, trembling like a newborn kit. Darkpaw glowered down at her, ready to snarl and hiss at the small grey she-cat, when suddenly she realised something. Pebblepaw was crying.

Firbush pushed the bramble bush aside easily and padded over to the two she-cats. His look was vaguely menacing, until he saw Pebblepaw in a ball with tears streaming down her face. At this point, a look of extreme discomfort spread over his face. Eventually he raised his voice in a yowl. "Shimmerclaw! Come here." To Darkpaw he added, "Shimmerclaw will deal with... this." He gestured to Pebblepaw's frantic, trembling frame. "You come with me."

As Darkpaw and Firbush pushed their way through the undergrowth back to the training clearing, Shimmerclaw looked at them with unease. "Where's Pebblep..." she began.

"Over there," Firbush vaguely gestured his paw in the direction the two of them had come. "She's having one of those... things again," he spat out half disdain, half bewilderment.

It was then that Darkpaw noticed Basstail, her tail and eyes proud as she herded Min and Batpaw into the clearing. Batpaw was covered in moss, and Min purred with amusement.

"Darkpaw." Troutstar turned to her with his piercing gaze.

"Yes?"

"Walk with me." With that, Troutstar turned abruptly and padded out of the clearing.

Darkpaw padded behind Troutstar as he made his way to a miniature river that lapped at his paws. He narrowed his eyes on her. " I think we need to talk," he mewed darkly. "The way you padded after Pebblepaw was more like that of a hunter, than that of a tracker."

Chapter 11

Chapter 11

"You'll soon feel my claws on your pelt, Pebblepaw! I'll drown you, and slit your throat, and rip your ears out a thousand times over before you feel the amount of pain I've felt. All because of you."

Pebblepaw was running for her life, through a gloomy oak forest. The shadows of trees crisscrossed the ground, as she dodged around towering maples and oaks. Her breath was coming out in harsh gasps, she felt as though her entire throat had been ripped out.

She was sure that her paw pads were cut, and bleeding, after the bramble bush she had run into. There, *they* had almost caught her. She thought she saw a flash of black fur and teeth, and swerved, desperate to get out of a gloomy forest. The cat was gaining on her, she had to hide.

Panic seared across her pelt, along with fear. *Please... I'm scared to die.* There was a sound of twigs breaking, only twenty or so tail lengths behind her. The shape was gaining on her, and Pebblepaw knew she would have to make a choice. A hollowed out oak tree loomed in front of her, and she bolted in, hoping that her pursuer would lose her scent trail.

She darted into the den, breath ragged, body shivering with fear. *I'm such a coward. I should be able to face my death head on.* The cat caught up to the hollow sniffing around, clearly trying to refind her scent trail which had stopped. She took a step back further into the den, and that was when she turned.

A massive pile of blood and bones stood at the back of the den, easily two times her size. Near the top of the pile was a dead female fox, with its neck still oozing out blood onto the pile of bones. On top of the fox was the small, broken shape of a young black tom cat, staring sightlessly ahead. *Nightpaw! Oh StarClan no!*

"So you've come to my shrine?" A shadow blocked the entrance, it was her pursuer. He fluffed up his black pelt, so similar to Darkpaw's, and smiled.

"Nightpaw," Pebblepaw gasped, bowing before him meekly. "I-I'm sorry..."

"You're going to be killed a thousand times over here," he said in his warm friendly voice, which sent a shudder through Pebblepaw's frame. "Then, you can just lay there..." He pointed to the bone pile, "like the fox I killed to save your worthless life."

Laughing, he lunged at her, and Pebblepaw dodged. She tried to land a blow on him, but her paw moved straight through his pelt. Nightpaw kicked her hard in the belly, and Pebblepaw rolled towards the bone pile, her head knocked against the prey pile, and bones scattered around her. They let out eerie clicks as they fell to the ground. Pebblepaw tried to move, but she couldn't. *I'm trapped in my own body!*

Pebblepaw's heart was racing, her head lolling. She felt like she was going to die of sheer panic and shock in Nightpaw's shrine. Padding towards her, Nightpaw smiled with his innocent amber eyes. He unsheathed his claws and put them on her throat to the extent that Pebblepaw gagged.

"Any last words before I kill you a thousand times over?" he asked brightly. "You deserve more, you know, but I suppose this'll have to do."

Pebblepaw's throat was being constrained, and she felt like she couldn't breathe. Eventually, she gasped out through the shadows that were swirling around her. "Kill me fast."

"Peb! Peb, Peb, Peb no!" Pebblepaw looked up through a haze of pain and confusion to see Min staring down at her.

Min's paws were on Pebblepaw's throat, and she let out a gasp, her whole body convulsing. She wretched on the ground, spitting up her last night's vole, and looked up into Min's alarmed face. "G-et of-ff," she managed out at last.

The weight was instantly lifted, and Min mewed awkwardly, "Sorry Peb."

Pebblepaw touched out a tentative paw and touched Min's shoulder. This cat was real. Letting her eyes adjust to the gloom, Pebblepaw saw that she was in the apprentice's den. Five neat and tidy piles of moss were spread around the small den. She looked down at her own bright green moss. It was ripped and torn, with one part to her right encompassed in brown-green bile. *Why do I have these fits? I used to be a normal cat. Now I'm like a complete wreck.*

"Sorry to you too, Min," Pebblepaw managed to say. "Thanks for waking me up." She tried and failed to put a cheerful grin on her face.

Min nudged her gently. "All good," she murmured gently. "Thor's gettin' some of those weed-herb thingies to make you feel better."

"That's kind of her," Pebblepaw mewed. She was beginning to learn just how compassionate and generous the easily agitated, philosophical apprentice was.

Suddenly, shards of her recent hopefully-just-a-dream pierced her, and she tried to take deep breaths to stop her mind from spiralling.

"Is he here?" she managed out. "Does he still want to kill me?"

"Who?" Thornpaw padded into the den carrying a wad of smelly herbs in her jaws. She looked at Min in confusion, but Min just shrugged.

"The rotting pile of blood and bones," Pebblepaw murmured. "Nightpaw's 'shrine.'"

Min winced visibly, as though Pebblepaw had just clawed her face off.

"Nope, he wouldn't do that, Pebblepaw," Thornpaw mewed, dropping her wad of herbs. "It was a dream. My advice is to remember Nightpaw in real life, not your dream Nightpaw."

Pebblepaw looked at the wad of herbs at her paws. "Do I...?"

Thornpaw nodded in confirmation. "Poppy seeds and thyme for dreamless sleep, they're for you. I told Shimmerclaw you weren't fit to train today, and she sent me with her good will."

As Pebblepaw lapped them up, Thornpaw guided her to the back of the den. "Peb can have my nest," Min meowed abruptly.

Thornpaw turned back and gave her a tight nod. She guided Pebblepaw to the back left of the den and into a massive mossy nest woven with colourful bird feathers, and other fluffy articles. She touched Pebblepaw's nose and murmured in her ear. "Focus on what you can control. Focus on what's in front of you, what your real senses see. Don't let your imagination get the better of you."

Pebblepaw found herself laying down in the soft nest. She closed her eyes, when suddenly Min was nudging into the nest beside her. "You can have my nest for always if you want," she murmured.

"Or... we could share it," Pebblepaw's words slurred together.

"Epic!" Min sounded with a purr of agreement, "so long as you don't mind my snores," she added.

"Naaah," Pebblepaw mewed drowsily.

She fell into a more comfy sleep to Min rambling on about possibilities for their new nest. "We could jay and dove feathers to the nest. I always did like a good jay feather myself. Granted they're not always the most cosy feathers. One time Batpaw came back with a set of six of them and they..."

Pebblepaw closed her and let herself fall into the warm embrace of dreamless sleep.

"And, yes you, Pebblepaw."

Pebblepaw looked up from where she'd been grooming Min's fur to hear Troutstar calling her name to attend the gathering. Since the escalations of border tension with ThunderClan, it had been a general rule in RiverClan that apprentices didn't go to the full moon meetings with the other clans. After all, as Basstail had once explained, apprentices are naive and foolish, with nothing running

through their tiny heads except for dreams of fierce battles and kit games.

"A gathering! Really, me?" she squeaked like a three moon old kit, regaining some of her lost excitable personality. *A gathering does sound, really, really fun.*

Some warriors exchanged bemused expressions at her outbursts, but Troutstar raised his voice above the ground to continue his address "Some apprentices are coming because they're mature enough now not to blurt out information..."

"Yeah, right," Pebblepaw heard Basstail mutter to Midnightstorm under her breath.

The tom fluffed up his pelt in agitation. *"My* apprentice was able to literally slit the throat of a fox before he... died," he muttered under his breath. Then, he slunk away.

Pebblepaw pricked her ears more attentively now. "We are at the last straw with ThunderClan, cats attending this gathering must be alert for signs of aggression. The time for peace is over, but we will not fight at the gathering. All cats going to the gathering today must be attentive, and try to get information out of the weaker ThunderClan warriors."

"Epic!" Carptuft announced brightly, nudging Sparkmist who grinned back with anticipation.

"Alright, let's get a move on!" Shimmerclaw's voice rang out amidst the gossiping and bustling of the RiverClan warriors. She whisked her tail, and all the warriors chosen to attend the gathering filed in a jostling clump behind her.

Pebblepaw got to her paws, just as the gathering patrol was making its way out of camp. She bounded over to them, propelling her small legs to keep up, "aren't you coming?" she asked Min when she realised the fluffy she-cat wasn't following her.

Min shook her head, "Nope, only you Thor, and Bat are going."

Pebblepaw blinked trying to see Min in the shadows of the

darkening sky, "not you and Darkpaw?" she asked, still padding toward the exit of the camp.

Pebblepaw thought she heard a response from Min, but she was too far away to be entirely sure. She pushed her way through the thorny barrier that encircled this part of camp, and blinked in the gloom of the intimidating towering oaks before her.

"Apparently," Darkpaw scoffed,"I'm not going because I 'stalked' you too much on the scenting Trial. Or so your bestie Troutstar says."

Pebblepaw whirled around to see a flash of green eyes and a black face beside a massive, gnarly oak. A shrill of fear ran through her, being alone with a cat who could very well be her enemy. She tripped over a protruding root, and fell to the ground, her face colliding with a bramble thicket. She winced as pain coarse through her face, but she had felt worse.

As she got to her paws, she thought she heard a chuckle and green eyes lighting up with malice, but she couldn't be certain. *Probably not,* she tried and failed to reassure herself.

"Are you coming, Pebblepaw? Or are you going to sit like a bump on a log? Young cats these days..." Pebblepaw looked up to see an old, elderly white tom looking back at her with irritation.

"Your mentor told me to look for you," Silverbrook offered crankily. "Now, come on!"

He shoved her with such force that Pebblepaw found herself stumbling forward a few pawsteps.

"Hurry up, youngsta!" He pushed her again and again, until the two of them caught up with the patrol.

Pebblepaw had always found the elder a little odd. He was ancient, and he looked it for sure, but he could hit with the ferocity of a warrior in their prime. He was also excessively cranky and irritable, and seemed to enjoy being that way.

"Great! You're back, Pebblepaw," Shimmerclaw's mew rang out in the now open moortop that they were crossing. "Want to come lead

with me?" she queried.

Pebblepaw shifted her paws to catch up with Shimmerclaw. Letting out a little "Sorry!" as she banged into Basstail. She remembered the last time her and Shimmerclaw had been at the lead of a patrol. *When I was a new apprentice. A little mousebrain who couldn't help but feel she deserved to be first in everything.* Pebblepaw flicked her tail in greeting as she caught up with Shimmerclaw.

On some days, especially after the nightmares, she felt as though she was losing herself bit by bit. She missed being the eager, excitably apprentice and young naive kit who thought little about death and destruction. Now, she felt like a shell of her past self. Pebblepaw lost herself in thought as the gathering patrol toiled up the moorland slope towards the gathering island.

Sure, I wasn't a perfect cat as a kit, but there was something about the way I used to laugh and play like no one was watching, and the way that I felt light and carefree. Pebblepaw missed that part the most of all. *Have I lost that part of myself forever? Will I always be this sad, anxious, depressed cat even as a warrior? As an elder? In StarClan?*

She held her tail up resolutely, remembering what Frostbark had once said to her in the Medicine Den. She tried to apply those words to action, and focus on what was going on in the moment. At first she thought of her gathering mission regarding ThunderClan. When that didn't work, only making her more anxious she tried a different approach; looking around at her surroundings. *Look, a tree! Another tree! And... there's another, you guessed it, tree!* It didn't make her entirely feel better, but she laughed a little on the inside about her antics, which made her heart ache less.

As they crested the marshy slope, Pebblepaw saw the gathering island, where she would see many new faces and enemies. She was especially eager to meet ShadowClan cats, who she had never shared a border with. She wondered if they were shadowy kittypet-lovers who she had heard nursery stories about, or if they were normal clan cats. *I am really excited.*

"This'll be... interesting," Pebblepaw swivelled her ears from the head of the patrol to hear Batpaw and Thornpaw chatting amongst

themselves.

"I wonder if ThunderClan cats look more ominous or less ominous during gatherings," Thornpaw mewed.

Batpaw yawned. "I don't think I want to know," he muttered.

"Apprentices! You scarcely know which way is up or down," that was Basstail's mocking voice. She tried to exchange an exasperated look with senior warrior Iceleap, but he looked at her with confusion and padded further away.

"Quiet!" Troutstar's voice rang out just as the cats were nearing the RiverClan bridge. "Stop your mousebrained racket, and listen up. This is likely the last gathering before war breaks out between us and ThunderClan. Now is the time to understand your enemies before you meet them in battle. Apprentices," he looked at Pebblepaw and gave her a slight nod. "You will be the best infiltrators, as ThunderClan cats will easily underestimate you."

With that, he moved to talk with a cluster of his most senior and trusted cats, including Brightclaw, Mousefang, and elder Silverbrook .

Shimmerclaw looked at Pebblepaw, a glint of amusement in her eyes as she nodded to the massive tree they were about to cross. "At least one cat falls off it every few moons. I did once, and it was *quite* the experience." She rolled her eyes, and one of the elders, Silverbrook, chuckled.

"You certainly were a wild one," the elder purred with amusement as he leaped onto the massive tree and dug his claws in deep.

Pebblepaw felt an unease ripple through her pelt as she padded onto the fallen tree, fastening her claws into the bark. She wasn't sure how she felt about meeting new cats; it took her a long time to feel comfortable around even her new denmates. She fluffed up her pelt, trying to look bigger and taller than she was.

As they pushed through the undergrowth and onto the clearing of the gathering island, Pebblepaw let out a gasp. It wasn't the Tall

Rock that made her gasp, nor the way the moonlight lit up the island so brightly; it was the cats. What felt like an infinite number of pelts and eyes turned to greet RiverClan.

"Now is the mingling time," Shimmerclaw mewed cheerfully. She nodded to a group of three other cats sitting at the base of the Tall Rock. "I'll be over there if you need me. This is your time to work on your peace-talking skills, Pebblepaw. Get information at this gathering, and you will be rewarded with maybe even saving a clanmate's life. With that she was gone.

Thornpaw and Batpaw were gossiping together, as they padded out into the clearing. Pebblepaw wished she had a littermate to gossip and talk to, but she was now all alone.

Tentatively, Pebblepaw padded toward a bush where she could hide until the gathering started. Then she remembered Shimmerclaw's words, "you will be... maybe even saving a clanmate's life. Then, she abruptly turned and raced towards the group of young cats lit up by shafts of moonlight.

"Er... hey." She began, instantly feeling awkward.

A young cream she-cat with a limp instantly whirled around to glower at her with burning amber-red eyes. "And you are?" she hissed menacingly.

ThunderClan! Pebblepaw instantly realised their scent. "Pebblepaw," she offered, trying to sound friendly and amiable.

The she-cat paced around her, tail high, eyes narrowed to slits. "You're small," she announced.

"Uh... what my sister means is, welcome to the gathering!" Pebblepaw turned to see a massive, bulky grey tom with a protruding tooth.

"I'm Boulderpaw, and that's Scarletpaw," he nodded to the fearsome she-cat. "You seem nice enough. That's great! Every apprentice in my own clan is kind of snobbish and stuck up in their own unique special way. Except for maybe Creampaw, I sorta guess, but he's

unique in other ways. Cats say I ramble tons, but I don't think so. What's your name? Did you already tell me? Sorry if I... umph!"

"Shut it, mousebrain," a ThunderClan she-cat hissed. "She's the enemy."

"Ah... right," Boulderpaw echoed. He narrowed his eyes and let out a loud low-pitched growl.

I have to get information out of these cats? The gathering was already overwhelming Pebblepaw; too many scents, too many cats. She awkwardly excused herself from the clump of ThunderClan apprentices, and promptly wretched near to the lakeshore.

"Oh, hi there," another cat spoke. "Mossypaws, and you?"

The light brown tabby looked at her curiously. "Pebblepaw," she managed out.

Mossy Paws narrowed her eyes slightly. "Ya first time?" She queried. As Pebblepaw nodded, she added, "ah, mine too."

Mossypaws blinked with innocent eyes. "Tell me everything?!" She hissed.

"O-oh?" Pebblepaw managed out in confusion. *What?*

"Tell me please. Tell me ya Riverie schemes."

Pebblepaw ran from the apprentice who was unsheathing her claws. Just as she did, she saw two cats, one a massive dark brown tom, the other an extremely small white she-cat. As she continued staring, she heard words that chilled her to the bone.

"Are you sure, Mightystar?"

"Yes. Take the kittypets hostage, and any other young or reckless cats you find lying around. They'll be very helpful for my... plans."

Chapter 12

Chapter 12

Darkpaw stared at the walls of the Medicine Den, glowering at Frostbark. He glowered at her right back, with his intense, cold ice-blue eyes. She rounded her eyes and took a step towards the front of the den.

"Stop right there," he hissed.

The two cats were inside of the Medicine Den, and Frostbark was blocking Darkpaw's exit with his scrawny light grey pelt. She had had to go in for a 'check-up,' which she had already found suspicious, considering he had asked for her late at night. Though, as soon as she had stepped into the den, he had blocked the entrance, and threatened her with physical violence.

"What do you want, healer?" she snapped at him, fluffing up her fur to look more intimidating.

Frostbark glowered at Darkpaw, and stepped closer to her, on light pawsteps. "I know your secret," he murmured to her. "I know what you want."

"Oh, you do?" Darkpaw asked with innocence. Inwardly, she was thinking out her options. She could yowl for help, and yet, she wanted to hear what this ancient so-called healer was meowing about.

"Yes. To tell you the truth, apprentice, if I hadn't ended my days of physical violence, and destruction, you would be long gone." Frostbark said, in a vaguely threatening tone. Darkpaw merely raised her eyebrows. She doubted that.

Frostbark let out a frustrated sigh. He flicked his tail. "Come with me, out into the forest," he gestured.

The two of them padded side by side out into the forest. They passed the grey tom, Mousefang, who was idly pawing at a daisy he had put on his head. He simply nodded at them, as Darkpaw and Frostbark made their way into the eerie, gloomy forest on RiverClan territory. They padded in silence for a long time, Darkpaw, wondering why she was even following the mousebrained healer.

Eventually they settled in a clearing so dark that Darkpaw could only see the glint of Frostbark's piercing ice blue gaze. "You are a fool," he rasped, bluntly and sharply. "A fool who will only get herself and others hurt by her recklessness. I know your secret, Darkpaw, you seek alliances with those who only want to destroy."

Darkpaw wanted to lash out at the tom, to claw his pelt off, but she was mesmerised by Frostbark's eyes, which stared directly at her, with a knowing expression. She could tell just by looking at him, that he knew her spirit cat alliance.

"Yep. What a clever ancient cat. You seem to know it all. But you can't hurt me, can you? You would if you could." She saw his eyes flash with fury, and instantly knew. "You swore not to, didn't you. What foolishness."

Frostbark closed his eyes, and suddenly Darkpaw found herself lost in a forest of gloom and shadow. For a brief, anguishing second, she thought that Frostbark had abandoned her in this eerie forest to die. Then, he spoke, although not with fury, but with sadness.

"You are like this forest, Darkpaw," he meowed. "Once bright, now the forest is shrouded in darkness to the extent that we can't even see each other. As is your heart, Darkpaw. You let anger consume you, so entirely, that it is all you think of. In this dark forest, that is your heart, the light stumbles around blindly, lost. The light is still there, but with so much darkness, surely it will one day..."

Darkpaw lost control. "Shut it, mousebrain," she snapped. "I'm not 'evil,' if that's what you think."

"But what you *are* is alone." Darkpaw imagined Frostbark shrug his shoulders regrettably.

She looked at him. Her eyes light with mistrust, but also fear.

"You can still fight, but the mountain you are trying to climb is getting harder by the second." With that, he was gone, leaving Darkpaw alone in the shadows.

"Well. I'm impressed, Darkpaw," Firbush announced, as Darkpaw padded into camp, laden with freshkill With just a touch of snarl in his voice, he added "it seems that within the next half moon, you'll be ready for your final assessment. And you might even win those mousebrained Flame Trials that Troutstar has started up again.

Darkpaw gave him a tight nod, and padded out to a corner of camp to sunbathe herself. It seemed so odd, the way that things kept on moving in RiverClan, even after Nightpaw's death. Her second ever Leaf-Bare was on the way, and she and Pebblepaw were neck and neck in the Flame Trials. Everything in camp seemed normal, and yet, Darkpaw couldn't shake off a certain premonition. She felt as though she was in the eye of the storm, danger surrounding her on all sides.

She had been meeting with the spirit cats, yet the messages they tried to feed through her flew around her, like a warm breeze. She honestly didn't give a mouselength about 'reviving old traditions of spirit cat leadership and control,' or their ideals on 'being a true warrior.' She only cared about Pebblepaw, her mind brewing on thoughts of pain and vengeance that she hadn't yet acted on. 'Too difficult' or 'not cruel enough,' she hadn't yet decided on what Pebblepaw deserved.

It had been interesting to watch Pebblepaw, though, to see her fear and anxiety. If Frostbark thought she had become a different sort of cat, he should even just glance at Pebblepaw. She had all the apprentices around her paw. She seemed to have horrendous 'anxiety attacks' which resulted in her having to take thyme and poppy seeds from Frostbark, and worst of all was her act of moping around camp all the time. It was obviously an act; Pebblepaw couldn't be *that* miserable. If anything, it was Darkpaw who was miserable, having to think of a punishment for the grey she-cat.

A thought flitted instantly in her mind. *Yes!* She liked it. This would

be the best way to eliminate and destroy Pebblepaw.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13

Pebblepaw had yet to learn how warriors managed to keep going, even after all the brutality and violence that they witnessed. If she was honest, she couldn't. Every day she woke up, and the bright greenleaf sunshine felt a little more ominous, a little more deadly, and Darkpaw's eyes flashed with even more interest as she watched her stumble.

Training was easy. It always had been for Pebblepaw. Shimerclaw was an excellent mentor, and Pebblepaw was easily skimming through her training. Personal life, on the other paw, was not. Before the fox, which felt so long ago, she had been peppy, arrogant, and generally less empathetic. Now, she felt like she'd done a complete one-eighty.

Every time a cat had so much as a miniature thorn in their paw, she winced in agony. When a cat so much as spoke harshly near her, she felt like she was going to be killed. Now, even she could feel her tail drooping throughout the entire day. The worst part about her 'new normal,' though, was the dreams which plagued her at night of the guilt of watching all her friends die around her.

"Hey, sharpyclaws, what did you do to the bedding this time."

Pebble instantaneously sat bolt upright, gasping for air. She was in the apprentices' den. She was safe.

"Down here," a tired voice murmured, and Pebblepaw looked down to see a tired Min looking forlornly at the tattered moss and bird feathers that could once have been called a nest. Min's eyes were friendly, but tired as she looked at the remains of the nest the two she-cats had shared for the past half moon.

"Sorry," Pebblepaw gasped, and scampered out of the den into the cool dawn light.

What seemed like the whole clan instantly looked up at her as she ran out of the apprentice's den. Her messy fur, full of moss. Along with the warriors, was her mentor, Shimmerclaw. She suddenly realised that it was probably the time when patrols were being announced, and felt instantly embarrassed.

"Well looky at the moss monster!" Sparkmist exclaimed, and meows of laughter from the whole crowd greeted her remark.

Shimmerclaw looked upset. Snowflight looked anxious. Carptuft looked bemused. Everyone looked at *her.* Pebblepaw abruptly wheeled around and bolted into the undergrowth, and out of camp. She wanted to run away, wanted to hide, wanted the world to just stop spiralling out of control. Pebblepaw thought she saw a flicker of black fur, but shook off her apprehension. *Probably just a hare,* she rationned. *Nothing to worry about at all.*

It was odd how quickly Pebblepaw's perceptions on reality could change. How she had gone from a bubbly, naive she-cat to this anxious, emotional wreck that she was now. Through it all, though, she had held on to her tentative friends. Thornpaw, the dutiful worker, Batpaw, the silent analyst, and Min, the lively. It was Darkpaw who scared her, Darkpaw who made her shiver.

Her paws trembled as she raced through the forest. She thought of Min, her new close friend, who had run out of the camp in search of trouble to fight. *I won't do that,* she promised herself. *I just need some... alone time.* Despite her vow, she found herself running towards ThunderClan territory.

"Mousedung!" Pebblepaw swore as she tripped over a large root protruding in the ground.

Pebblepaw was flung into the air, panic shooting through her like frostbite. She twisted and tumbled down a steep hill, and toward ThunderClan territory. It all happened so fast. Within a few seconds, her whole body collided with a tree, and she winced with pain.

Stars speckled Pebblepaw's vision, and she took deep, gasping breaths to remain on her paws. She shut her eyes, hoping that it

would block out the ringing in her ears. Within a few minutes, she noticed something that should have been obvious to her much earlier on.

I'm on ThunderClan territory!

Pebblepaw whirled around, letting her jaws taste the air, trying to determine where her own scent markers should be. All she could scent was ThunderClan, and for a brief, agonising moment, she thought that she might die here, ripped apart by ThunderClan mange pelts. That was when she noticed something else. RiverClan scent. Then, she saw black fur, just as Darkpaw emerged from the bushes, smiling with all her teeth.

"Well, well, well. You're all alone," Darkpaw murmured half to herself as she sat down at the roots of a massive oak tree, and licked her paw casually.

Pebblepaw fluffed up her pelt, and stared at Darkpaw's fearsome green eyes, her unsheathed claws, the way she sat, serene and smug. *She's been tracking me!*

"Darkpaw!" Pebblepaw managed out hoarsely. "You shouldn't be on ThunderClan territory... it's illegal."

Darkpaw raised a forepaw and licked it. "And yet you are here as well," she mewed casually.

Pebblepaw looked anxiously at the trees around her. At the overwhelming stench of ThunderClan and winced inwardly. "You're right to be upset," she tried mewing fearfully. "It happened two moons ago, and I still feel guilt every day.."

Darkpaw sneered and got to her paws. "I don't 'make up' with murderers," she snarled, lashing her tail.

"Please try to..."

Darkpaw looked straight at her with round, green eyes and fury. "You killed him," she spat.

Pebblepaw looked straight back at her. The helpless pain and fury

smeared across her face. She saw the real Darkpaw, then, for the first time in moons, perhaps for the first time ever. A can who was alone in a whirlwind of emotions. A cat who held her pain from others. Fear, mistrust, sadness, a competitive drive, fury, all mixed up and put into one cat. Darkpaw held it in well, but now it was all coming out.

"I won't let you kill me," Pebblepaw said, feeling sad. She wanted to let Darkpaw have her vengeance, but now, she had friends, a life, cats she cared for and who cared for her. She didn't want Min to be alone anymore than she already was.

Darkpaw padded softly toward her. Pebblepaw almost expected her to hand out her paw in truce. But Darkpaw's loathing had gone too far for that. Her green eyes narrowed slightly and she shrugged. "That's not a choice you get to make," she hissed. Then she leaped.

Pebblepaw was slammed to the ground, and Darkpaw pinned her easily. Pebblepaw used her small size to squirm out of Darkpaw's grasp and stand up. Pebblepaw unsheathed her claws, ready to meet her attacker.

How did it all go so wrong? she thought inwardly as Darkpaw regained her composure for another attack. Memories flashed through her. Had she been lying to herself when she'd thought they'd been rivals as kits? And what of the time when the two of them had shared a nest together after Darkpaw had dislocated her shoulder as a kit?

Now Darkpaw stood before her desperation glittering in her eyes. *She wants to stop feeling it,* Pebblepaw thought to herself. *What we both feel, everytime we wake up; guilt and agonising grief. But... you can't fight fury with more fury.*

Darkpaw, quick as a snake leaped at her, but Pebblepaw dodged and landed a blow on her shoulder. Blood spurted out. The two she-cats found themselves in a desperate fray, clawing, feigning, scratching. Pebblepaw felt agony sear her pelt as Darkpaw continued to rain blows on her, but she fought back, nipping and scratching.

The two she-cats twisted and rolled among the undergrowth and trees. Their eyes were locked on each other; both desperate. Eventually, it was clear that Darkpaw was getting the upper paw. Her blows had more impact on Pebblepaw, and it wasn't long before she was gasping for air, muscles straining.

Her paws flailed desperately, but Darkpaw soon stood beneath her. Pebblepaw fought against the waves of unconsciousness that seemed to be taking over. Darkpaw tightened her grip on Pebblepaw's throat with one paw, but something flashed in her eyes. *Uncertainty?* Darkpaw lifted up her bloodied paw, about to deal Pebblepaw the final blow, and Pebblepaw shut her eyes. *Starclan, please let it be fast.*

A fearsome war with ThunderClan. A death that she had caused. A cat, preparing to slice open her throat.

Great StarClan! Where did it all go so wrong?

Chapter 14

Chapter 14

All her life, Darkpaw had held onto the hope that everything was black and white. Good or evil, happy or sad, and so on. As she neared the end of her apprentice days, she learned that that simply wasn't the truth.

Another thing Darkpaw had always thought as a young 'paw was that Pebblepaw was awful. She let these thoughts slip into her mind because she felt insecure that the younger, smaller cat was better than her. When her brother died, she knew that Pebblepaw must have done it on purpose. The crying, the fear, the anxiety attacks, those were fake.

And yet, Darkpaw did have memories of cuddling up to Pebblepaw as kits, the two of them gossiping together about everything going on in the clans. Those memories were so old, she had thought Pebblepaw was the one that had changed. But now, with Pebblepaw laying, bleeding beneath her, she suddenly had a scary thought. *Am I the one who changed? Am I evil? Is Pebblepaw harmless and good?*

Darkpaw shook those thoughts away, and focussed on her fury, her vengeance. *This is it! One movement of my forepaw, and everything will be over.*

The forest swirled around Darkpaw as she raised her forepaw. Pebblepaw had stopped squirming, her eyes were tight shut, her mouth in a grimace that would have been almost amusing if not for the dire circumstances. The world seemed to slow, seemed to feel unreal, as Darkpaw moved her raised forepaw rapidly towards Pebblepaw's throat.

It was then that something struck her from behind. Red and white fur flashed in the corner of her vision, and suddenly a massive, hulking figure stood above her. For a second, Darkpaw thought it

was a fox, but this shape was too nimble and lively. As Darkpaw's vision seemed to clear, she found herself beneath a ThunderClan warrior.

"Wait, wait, wait. Let me get this straight," the ThunderClan tom spoke to her, amusement sounding in his voice. It was oddly high pitched for a tom so massive. "Did I read the situation wrong, or did I just see two RiverClan she-kits tryna kill each other?"

Darkpaw spat at him, but the red and white tom merely laughed in his odd high pitched voice. "There's gotta be a fun story behind that one!"

Squirming, Darkpaw managed to claw at the face of the ThunderClan tom sufficiently for him to rear back in shock and let it up. It only took a few seconds for Darkpaw to assess the situation. Five ThunderClan mangepelts faced her. One lithe brown tabby tom looked down at the motionless shape of Pebblepaw in exasperation and confusion. *Is she... dead?* Darkpaw couldn't tell from her angle.

She was about to run, when she suddenly noticed two shapes flash out of the corner of her vision, blocking her way back to RiverClan territory. Leaves swirled around her, as Darkpaw let out as low a growl as she could. *Only one option then... fight!*

"No need to be too hasty," an old scarred she-cat said with a raspy purr. "We'll just... oh I dunno take you and your buddy here hostage. No big deal. Come willingly, and you'll be treated as a friend."

Darkpaw highly doubted that. Her eyes scanned the advancing circle of ThunderClan warriors, looking for a weak link. She decided on a small, young pale rose-coloured she-cat that was limping. Letting out a savage cry, Darkpaw leaped.

The she-cat's looked at her with cruel amusement. "I'm a weak link, eh?" She purred.

Darkpaw tried to land on the she-cat, but she dodged easily. Darkpaw winced as her own shoulder collided with the bark of a maple tree. She was weak from her battle with Pebblepaw, but

surely she could still manage an escape?

The cream she-cat leaped at Darkpaw, bowling her over, and pinning her to the ground. She lifted up a forepaw and clawed Darkpaw's face. Feeling like her entire face had just been clawed off, Darkpaw writhed even more furiously, and the she-cat narrowed her eyes angrily.

"I've an idea," a cat's voice rang out.

Darkpaw growled, and writhed under the she-cat's grip, when suddenly something hit her on the head, and the world went dark.

"Hey, get those leaves for me," Darkpaw shifted her paws, trying to hear and understand what was going on. Her mind felt fuzzy, and she tried to place together where she was, and what was going on.

"Leaves, leaves, leaves! I don't care about your silly leaves, old kitty."

Blearily, Darkpaw opened her eyes, trying to figure out what was going on. Her entire face felt like it had been clawed off, and there were sharp bursts of pain all throughout her body. She slowly took in her surroundings. A den. Two cats, one ginger, one a peachy tabby. A motionless grey lump at the back of the den.

"Hey, you." The ginger tom nudged the peachy she-cat in the ribs. "They're awake."

Darkpaw tried to move, to stand up to glower at the cats, but she found that she couldn't even move her leg. The ginger tom padded over to Darkpaw, a look of irritated boredom on his face. "Eat." He placed a package of herbs in front of Darkpaw.

"I'm not gonna eat your foxdunged herbs!" Darkpaw spat at him.

The peachy and brown she-cat padded up to Darkpaw too, green eyes gleaming with amusement. "Like you have a choice, hostage," she spat at Darkpaw.

"H-hostage?" Darkpaw queried. She managed to, with effort, move her face to look straight at the she-cat and tom.

"Yeperz. You and your pal. She might not live, though, so... yeah. Yer our Riverie hostage!"

"They're *RiverClan*, Mossypaws. No cat cares about your mousebrained made up words. Now I'm gonna get Mightystar. See how she feels about this grand mess."

"What in the foxdunged StarClan cursed universe is going on," Darkpaw hissed at Mossy Paws as the tom abruptly turned and padded out of the den.

"Eat the weeds and I'll tell ya," Mossypaws muttered. "StarClan knows why Larchbreeze forced me to be an apprentice Medicine Cat."

"If you're an apprentice, then why does your name end in 'paws,'" Darkpaw queried, trying to figure out a way to hide the bundle of herbs instead of eating them.

Mossypaws chuckled a dry, purring laugh, "trust me bud, there's tons of things that you don't know about ThunderClan. This is one of those things you don't wanna know, ya know."

She stared intently at Darkpaw with her perceptive green eyes, until Darkpaw gave in and reluctantly ate the wad of herbs. At this point, Mossypaws turned, grumbling, to look at Pebblepaw's motionless form.

"Is she..." Darkpaw began, but was cut off by a fierce meow.

"Welcome, Hostage!"

Darkpaw turned toward the entrance of the minuscule, dark Medicine Den. It was a massive smoky grey tabby tom who had just meowed. Behind him padded an extremely small white she-cat with piercing crystal blue eyes. The two were certainly an odd pair.

Darkpaw didn't speak. She merely turned her head and narrowed her green eyes at the tom. The tiny she-cat was whispering in the ear of the tom.

The massive tom boomed out, "we minorly apologise for your...

rough shape when entering our territory. You see, Scarletpaw becomes very unpleasant when you target her weak shoulder."

This time Darkpaw spoke. She glowered up at the smoky tom, and growled. "I know who you are, you're Mightystar! And as for my rough shape, foxdung to that. I don't give a mouselength whether your precious Scarletpaw even manages to scar me for life."

Darkpaw watched through slitted eyes, wondering how the cats would react to her outburst. She had purposefully used rough language, to see whether her temporary captors were easily agitated. The tom looked down at the she-cat, who gave him a sharp nod.

"Ah, but I ain't Mightystar, misses," the tom began, changing out of the formal tone into a surprisingly cheerful one. "I'm Smokeblaze, proud Fierce-Protector of the glorious Mightystar. I am but a mere servant to her gloriousness."

The tom, Smokeblaze, abruptly turned and bowed his head low to the she-cat. That was when Darkpaw looked at the white cat for longer than a moment, and a shrill of awe shot through her. Her chin was held high, blue eyes cool and indifferent. How could this miniature cat lead ThunderClan, known for their ferocity and vengeance?

"Whoops," she meowed casually. "My bad."

The she-cat spoke for the very first time. Her voice was shrill and high pitched, more like the squeal of a kit, then the speech of a normal cat. "You know, hostage," she meowed. "You strike me as an unlikable sort of cat. It is a good thing I suppose that I, Mightystar, am not irritated by such arrogant impudence."

Darkpaw looked between them, a look of confusion on her face. "Take her to my den!" Mightystar meowed shrilly.

"She really ain't ready for movem..." That was the abruptly cut off voice of the ginger tom.

He had been cut off because of the glare that the Smokeblaze shot

him, unsheathing his claws, which were massive.

"Smokeblaze will carry her then," Mightystar meowed in a squeaky voice that really didn't sound all that mighty.

Mossypaws shoved her rump hard, and Darkpaw staggered to trembling paws, only to flop back down on the back of Smokeblaze. The herbs Mossypaws had given her must have helped her regain some muscle strength, because she managed to dig her claws deep into Smokeblaze's pelt, and lift her head up. Now that Mightystar was gone, Smokeblaze was visibly more relaxed. He shot her a jubilant grin, and murmured "off we go!" before strutting out of the den.

It was then that Darkpaw saw, for the first time, ThunderClan camp. It was a sight that surprised her. She had expected bones resting everywhere, and rotted pieces of freshkill laying around, but what met her was even more disturbing, even more *wrong*.

ThunderClan camp was a clean, elegant fortress, bustling with activity. There were easily enough cats lounging around in camp to rival RiverClan, and then some. As she looked around, Darkpaw saw a group of cats casually chatting by the freshkill pile, looking plump and well-fed. As she continued watching, a scrawny tom and mangy she-cat padded up to the cats, bowing their heads in fearful submission. The scrawny tom tentatively reached out a paw to snag a plump vole, but a plump dark brown she-cat hissed at him and clawed at his face, drawing blood. The tom padded away on unsteady paws, whimpering. The mangy she-cat bowed her head low and proceeded to delicately groom the fur of the dark brown she-cat.

All around the camp, there were similar social interactions going on. As Darkpaw watched from the back of Smokeblaze, a muscular calico strutted forward confidently out of the camp, while three cats huddled around the calico submissively.

Just as they were nearing a narrow ridge, which led to a den, Darkpaw hissed in Smokeblaze's ear, "what is this? Are you even a clan?"

Smokeblaze's muscles tensed, and his gaze darted around nervously, "Mightystar has... changed what it means to be a clan. You see..." he paused. "There's kinda this social hierarchy. There are four groups; Fierce-Protectors, who guard and are trained in combat and protection, Swift-Runners, who are in charge of border patrolling and strategy, Prey-Catchers, who... well, catch prey, and the *rest.* 'Tinypelts,' they're called in honour of Mightystar's warrior name."

Darkpaw didn't really understand, and she didn't care to, but she still had one question as Smokeblaze led her up the ridge. "So why are you taking... hostages?"

Smokeblaze's muscles tensed once more, and his entire demeanour changed. He didn't speak, merely padded up the ridge and deposited Darkpaw at the front of the den. Mightystar's den was massive and imposing, woven leaves and massive sticks put together to form a den that could easily house ten cats, it seemed.

"Leave her there, Fierce-Protector," Mightystar's voice sounded muffled from inside of the den.

Smokeblaze shrugged, his shoulder muscles rippling, and padded away from the den. Darkpaw tentatively got to her paws and, trembling, made her way forward into a place that could certainly be her final resting place. *Mightystar won't dare fight me, though! She's small and weak looking!* Darkpaw tried to fill herself with anger as her eyes adjusted to the dim light of the den, but she only felt exhaustion.

Mightystar padded forward and let out a warm mrow. "Welcome to my den, hostage. I believe we have some common goals, and that you'll enjoy listening to my speech."

"Oh, yeah?"

Mightystar looked at her with piercing blue eyes, and grinned slightly. "Yes. Our goals align quite nicely. In fact, you might even rise to power here. Who's to say."

As Darkpaw hesitated, Mightystar spoke up again. "Yes, you could be a very useful ThunderClan cat and RiverClan traitor. After all,

you seem smart, you surely know that ThunderClan is ready for war, and will easily squash your clan."

As though in further emphasis, Mightystar squashed a beetle that had been padding under paw. She purred and licked the blood off her paw.

Darkpaw let out a snarl, and lunged for Mightystar. If she killed this mousebrain, she would save RiverClan from all their trouble.

But, she was weak, and Mightystar was deceptively agile, and well, mighty. Mightystar dodged her attack neatly, and leaped atop Darkpaw.

"Rule number one," she meowed, almost casually, atop Darkpaw's back. "Don't ever alienate me."

Mightystar slashed at Darkpaw's cheek with claws so sharp, that Darkpaw let out an involuntary high pitched screech of agony. She staggered to the side of the den, feeling the blood well out from her cheek and onto her paws. Mightystar padded up to her casually.

"My claws have scarred you for life, so you won't ever forget it is I who wields the real power here.Yes, I know it's a pity; your face was beautiful," she meowed. "Now, can we just have a normal conversation? And don't talk back, unless you don't want to ever leave the den... alive."

Darkpaw wanted to lash out again, but she knew when she was beaten. Like a dog now leashed to its twoleg, she dipped her still bleeding head submissively. *Just for show,* she tried to convince herself, *I bow to no one!*

Mightystar purred in her high pitched voice, "a wise cat, you are. You see, I know about the troubles you've been having in RiverClan, and how me offering you a place here would end all your troubles."

That earned a gasp from Darkpaw. Mightystar turned and blinked fondly at her, twitching her whiskers in amusement.

Darkpaw was crumpling forward, the blood welling from her face seemed to clog her entire senses, until she tasted nothing but blood.

Black speckles were all around her, dancing around her vision, and growing larger. She felt as though she was being dragged down, down, down into an empty dark pit. The last thing Darkpaw heard before the blood and darkness choked her entirely came from a squeaky voice above her.

"Yes, Darkpaw, you may indeed prove very useful to my plans."

Chapter 15

Chapter 15

"Come on, kitty, let's get you to the hostages den."

Darkpaw trembled on her paws as she padded woozley down the slope and out of Mightystar's den. Her head was spinning from all the blood she had lost, and she left bloody pawsteps wherever she walked. She felt like passing out again, but Mightystar's words had sent shrills of horror through her bones. She wasn't sure if she would ever be able to let herself sleep again, after all she had seen in ThunderClan. It seemed she had managed to pass out for almost a full day, though.

Her thoughts were beginning to wander into an ominous place, when she was shoved forcefully by an intimidating blue-grey tabby tom. He pushed her again, even more roughly, and Darkpaw fell forward, her face planting in dark mud. She winced as mud seeped into her wounded face.

"Aw, is the little kitty depressed?" the tom spoke with mock kindness in Darkpaw's ear. "Do you miss the friend you probably killed already?"

Pebblepaw! In all of the weirdness that had flashed before Darkpaw's eyes, she hadn't had time to process her emotions towards the apprentice. The way her claws had been moments away from killing her, because...? Mightystar's words flashed in Darkpaw's mind again.

Blackness was swirling in Darkpaw's vision again, when suddenly the tom was prodding at her with sharp claws. *Does the mousebrain even comprehend basic decency,* Darkpaw wondered.

"Nettleclaw!" That was a high pitched voice. "What are you doing to our guest?"

"I thought the term was hostage, Mighty, and I was taking it to the hostage den," the blue-grey tom, Nettleclaw, meowed, with a mocking air about him.

As Darkpaw pressed her paws into the mud to get up, she saw Mightystar standing glowering at Nettleclaw. "You may be my past mentor, but you've got no right to alienate me," she hissed.

Darkpaw stood on shaky paws as Mightystar spoke again. "This cat is an ally. She will be treated as such. The real question is, Nettleclaw, are you an ally?"

Nettleclaw dropped his gaze and dipped his head in reluctant acceptance. "Fine," he muttered. "I'll take it to the apprentice's den."

Mightystar fluffed up her pelt, and narrowed her eyes at Nettleclaw. "That's not sufficient, Nettleclaw. In fact, *you* will be taking her place in the hostage den until I say otherwise."

"I'm going hunting," Nettleclaw muttered.

Without Nettleclaw to lean against, Darkpaw's paws buckled beneath her, and she collapsed in the mud. She could only raise her head slightly to see Nettleclaw padded away, in an act of rebellion, his tail flicking in agitation. Mightystar nodded to two of the cats standing by the freshkill pile. "Deal with *it,"* she meowed coolly.

Darkpaw watched as the two cats darted toward Nettleclaw and fastened their claws into his fur. The two cats dragged a kicking and screeching Nettleclaw out of camp. Darkpaw bowed her head to Mightystar, and tried to stand up. The exit was so close to her now. *If I can just...*

"Hey there, I'm Boulderpaw, your new clanmate. Or... maybe you're my new clanmate. Huh hard to say I guess, anyway, who are you? I'll be staying with you forever and always for now I guess. That's what my mentor, Smokeblaze, told me, anyway. So..."

Darkpaw cut him off. She was panting, her sides heaving, and the world spiralling. "The den?" she hissed and spat at him.

Boulderpaw didn't seem in any way alarmed or even agitated by

Darkpaw's outburst. "Yeppers, right over there." He pointed to a shady den right beside another bigger den. "Right beside the warrior's den."

Darkpaw leaned on him and he guided her toward the den, him chattering like a baby starling all the way there. Darkpaw knew how to cut off the useless chatter of cats that she didn't want to listen to. Like Batpaw, for instance.

She wasn't sure if she ever made it to the apprentice's den before passing out, or if she simply collapsed into Boulderpaw's massive grey pelt.

"Darkpaw? I think we really need to understand each other better."

Darkpaw blinked open her eyes to see two massive spirit cats glowering at her with spiky fur and outstretched claws. She recognized them at once; Earthstar and Brightshadow, the latter of which was Frostbark's mother. She knew she was dreaming, and since they were here, she had questions.

Darkpaw rounded on the shapes, curling her claws into the leafy ground. "Who is this Mightystar? What in StarClan's name is this ThunderClan cult-thing? And, what do *you* really want from me?"

Earthstar spoke first, through slitted eyes. "The first one should be obvious to you. She's the ThunderClan leader, and a pain in the tail. ThunderClan is what it is. I'm sure you'll get to know it soon enough, since you're there now. And as for what we want..."

Brightshadow cut him off with a glare. "We want to help the clans out of this mess. You are a key player in this, Darkpaw. You can trust us, or trust RiverClan to help you out of this dark age. See what works out for you."

Darkpaw flicked her tail to and fro in agitation. "And what of Pebblepaw?" she hissed.

"Pebblepaw... we saw a future in which Troutstar was flea-brained enough to make her deputy. When she ascended to leadership, she fought us, trying to win. What an inferior gnat.

But Darkpaw saw one more piece in the puzzle that was growing ever more confusing by the passing second. "By killing Pebblepaw," she began slowly. "You knew that I would antagonise Troutstar. You thought that RiverClan would kick me out, that I would get angry and vengeful, because that's all I am to you; a pawn. Not a cat that you cared about helping to succeed; you saw me as a monster."

Earthstar lashed his tail, "well," he mewed. "Hate to break it to ya, kit, but you are."

Darkpaw narrowed her eyes. "You used me."

Brightshadow padded around her, and draped her tail across Darkpaw's shoulder. "No, used is the wrong word. More so... guided. You wanted Pebblepaw dead, didn't you?"

"I wanted her to disappear, wanted her to go away."

"And yet, you killed her. You're right, dearest Darkpaw, you are a *monster.* A cat with no feelings besides vengeance and desperate fury."

Darkpaw lashed her tail to and fro. "I don't want to ever see you again," she hissed. "You aren't my friends."

"You will see us again, but not for a very long time."

"You treat us like carrion now, but just wait and soon you'll find yourself in peril with no one to save you!"

"Hey! Wake up. Is it always this hard to... ow, that hurt, Scarletpaw."

Darkpaw shifted her paws blearily, and opened her jaws into a massive yawn. As she was gradually waking up, she tried to piece together what was going on. Her nest felt more comfortable than usual, as though feathers had been woven in. Where was she?

Then, came the sharp prod. *Batpaw!* It had to be her mousebrained denmate. She was probably in the RiverClan apprentice's den, sleeping late as usual after her spirit cat meetings. But, as Darkpaw opened her eyes, ready to give a sharp retort, it was not Batpaw

that she saw, it was a massive grey tom.

"Great, you're awake, finally. You passed out for literally a quarter moon. No joke," he added at Darkpaw's bewildered glare. "You were really out of it. That wound on your face got infected, and you were being really crazy. It was super epic, though. Was it fun?!"

Darkpaw opened her jaws ready to say that she had definitely not been asleep for a quarter moon, and that she had done no crazy things lately, but that would have been a lie. *Sure! Why not?* Darkpaw thought to herself. *After all the weirdness that's going on, this is pretty normal.*

"What's going on now?" She growled, wanting to claw the cheerful smile right off the tom's face.

Boulderpaw practically did a bounce of delight as the two cats padded out of the small, but oddly comfortable apprentice's den. As Darkpaw padded out, she thought she saw a she-cat at the back of the den, glowering at them furiously.

"No one ever wants me to keep talking!" He meowed excitedly. "Everyone says I'm annoying or something, but I know I'm not."

Darkpaw shoved her roughly, but the massive tom didn't stagger even in the slightest. "Just tell me what's going on?" She snarled.

"I'll be doing that," a voice half meowed half snarled. "Come with me, and no one says a word until we're out of camp, unless you like getting your ears ripped to shreds. Are you this slow, Smokeblaze?"

Darkpaw turned to see a calico she-cat stalking up to her, next to Smokeblaze. The tom gave the she-cat a hard look. "Just because you're a high ranking Swift-Runner, Swiftclaw, don't mean you can bully me." To his apprentice, Boulderpaw, he added, "let's leave these two difficult she-cats alone."

Darkpaw reluctantly padded out of camp behind the intimidating calico she-cat that was Swiftclaw. A few paces behind her, Darkpaw realised that there were two young scrawny cats. "Leave us, Stick and Twig, go clean the Elite's den."

The two cats dipped their heads fearfully and scampered away. Swiftclaw merely scowled. It seemed to take a long time, the two cats padding through the ominous oak forest, before Swiftclaw stopped at a clearing.

"Look," she hissed. "I'm a straight to the point sort of cat, I won't have any preamble. So, sit." She gestured with her tail.

Darkpaw reluctantly sat down beside the clump of bracken that Swiftclaw was pointing to. "Now," Swiftclaw began. "You're a ThunderClan apprentice, and I will be deciding which of the three paths, Swift-Runner, Fierce-Protector, or Prey-Catcher will best suit you. ThunderClan is preparing for war against RiverClan, and the battle date is a moon and a half from tomorrow, so you will be trained fast. Be submissive and you will succeed, get to mouthy, and you will find your throat in my claws. Your past life is no more, and no one will speak of it again."

Darkpaw forced a scowl off her face. *How mousebrained does she think I am? Like as though apprentices have nothing at all rattling around in their minds!*

She forced herself to nod. This was going to be extremely interesting at the very least. She wondered what her clanmates were thinking about her disappearance, though. Were they looking for her and Pebblepaw? Or had they lost hope already. Maybe they would break them out of ThunderClan. Even though Darkpaw wasn't a hostage, she knew she wasn't a free cat, either.

"First, the mock battle," was all Darkpaw heard before Swiftclaw leaped at her with intimidating unsheathed claws.

Darkpaw rolled her eyes, she had snuck up on many cats. Dodging to the left, she pretended to slash and Swiftclaw and then leaped out of range. Swiftclaw narrowed her eyes, and leaped again. This time, she was faster and the calico she-cat rammed into Darkpaw forcefully. When she had Darkpaw pinned, Darkpaw slipped away and leaped atop her back.

She winced as thorn sharp teeth snagged her hind leg, and tried desperately to claw at Swiftclaw's face. Holding true to her name,

Swiftclaw moved as fast as a minnow, and darted out of range.

For what seemed to go on endlessly, the two cats tossed and turned, locked in combat. Darkpaw could tell that she wasn't at risk of death, as Swiftclaw's blows weren't meant to injure. Eventually, the calico got the upper hand and pinned Darkpaw. Darkpaw tried desperately to wriggle away, but couldn't.

Swiftclaw merely sat back and licked a bloody forepaw. "Not bad. Quite fierce actually. Next, the hunting co..."

Her voice trailed away as she saw two toms enter the clearing. "Fiercebreeze and Owlspike," she meowed. "What's going on?"

The two toms bounded over to her. "We're talking about launching an attack on RiverClan to drive them out of their camp," a white one with massive scars criss-crossing his flank meowed. Mightystar wants you back at camp so us and the rest of the Elite can prepare."

As Swiftclaw got up, one of the toms blinked eagerly. "We be going to take some more daft RiverClan cats hostage if we can. Kill the others."

Swiftclaw swished her tail as she got up. "Follow," she mewed, not even turning to Darkpaw.

Darkpaw fluffed up her pelt against the word, *kill,* that turned her blood to ice. She forced back anger, and loathing resentment as she padded obediently behind the ThunderClan cats, wanting to claw their carrion pelts off.

"We got one already, actually, a young cat, not an apprentice... but she fought back," one of the toms, who was much younger, blinked back eagerly. "Mossypaws says she ain't gonna live to see another sunrise."

"Who?" Darkpaw asked.

Swiftclaw turned on her, pelt ruffling in agitation at the same time as the younger tom meowed, "Bass somethin' or other I think."

Swiftclaw glowered at the tom as Darkpaw's mind swayed. *What in*

StarClan's name is going on? They literally murder one of my clanmates and yet expect my loyalty.

Swiftclaw rounded on her, and spoke in an oddly monotone voice. "The whole of RiverClan is practically dead. You've been given a life here. Take it, or leave it and die."

Darkpaw simply dipped her head as the cats padded into camp. Mightystar looked at Swiftclaw. "What path should her paws follow?" she mewed, nodding to Darkpaw.

Swiftclaw bowed her head low. "She's as fully a Swift-Runner as any cat goes."

Mightystar nodded. "I thought that was the most likely option. "You shall be her mentor Swiftclaw. You have always been a faithful cat."

Swiftclaw dipped her head. "Of course, Mightystar. But..."

"Give her time, she will come around," Mightystar meowed and turned away.

Mossypaws was jumping up and down emphatically. "The Bass-kitty's dead!" she announced.

"Good. Let that be the first of many," Mightystar meowed with a detached air. "ThunderClan will rise and make the other clans cower before us."

Darkpaw stumbled away, everything sloshing around in her mind, until she felt genuinely sick. She padded over to a clump of stale moss and bracken, and threw up. Everything was exceptionally confusing, although Mightystar's words chilled her to the bone. *She'll come around. She's right,* Darkpaw thought. *What's the point of being in a carrion clan like RiverClan, when I could rise to power, here, in ThunderClan. Everyone hates me. Nobody trusts me, and I don't trust them. What's to lose in going a little... insane, and being a ThunderClan cat. Maybe it's my stupid destiny to be evil. I've certainly got the right claws for it. I've already killed one cat, after all.*

Chapter 16

Chapter 16

Pebblepaw hadn't been sure at first, but as her wounds were becoming infected, and as she drifted in and out of consciousness, she was convinced she was dying. Dying, in a forein land. Dying, not like a hero, but like a coward.

She felt entirely wretched, it was her fault that Darkpaw was evil, her fault that Nightpaw was dead, and her fault for dying when Min needed her most. Her mind spiralled away into unconsciousness, and Pebblepaw knew that this must be the end of her suffering.

"Pebblepaw! What are you trying to do?"

In the midst of the blackness that surrounded Pebblepaw, she heard a voice. *Is some cat welcoming me to StarClan?* And yet, even as Pebblepaw blinked her eyes several times, no starry cats surrounded her, and the darkness remained.

Pebblepaw opened her jaws to speak, feeling utterly miserable. "I'm leaving this StarClan cursed world. I'm a failure. No one wants me or cares about me. I'm an awful cat, and I just want it to be over."

For a second, Pebblepaw thought she was going mad. Maybe she had imagined the voice, imagined this entire conversation, but then the voice spoke again. "I care for you. Min cares for you, and wouldn't it be better to keep on living trying to make up for what you've done, and helping others, versus dying alone?" The voice quavered, and yet Pebblepaw almost swore she heard something like desperation.

"Why? I'm a terrible cat, and besides, I don't think I have a choice." Pebblepaw muttered.

"Are you even listening to me? Stop being so self-deprecating and

selfish, please. No one got better, got happier by wishing harm on themselves, or others. And you can alway fight. You're alive because cats fought for you, for your clan. You can't give up." The voice meowed.

Pebblepaw felt a pang in her chest. *I really have been so self-absorbed. Even now...* "How?" she meowed at last. "Is it my destiny to live?"

The voice spoke once more. "No cat chooses your fate, it is up to you. But know that if you fight, you will save the lives of many, with your spirit, your bravery, your love. Please, Pebblepaw if not for yourself, then for *me*?"

"You're Nightpaw aren't you?" Pebblepaw mewed, but she found herself alone.

Nightpaw's words rang in her head. *Great StarClan, when did he get so wise?* And yet, the way he spoke, the passion in his voice, Pebblepaw knew that it must have all come from personal experience. *Stop being so self-deprecating and selfish, please.*

Pebblepaw blinked, digging her claws into the blackness that surrounded her to root herself in place, even as thoughts swirled around her. *It won't be easy... but I could try.*

"I swore she was dead, the way she looked, all sunken down, but now her eyes are open wide..." an eager and bewildered mew sounded in Pebblepaw's vision.

Pebblepaw winced inwardly. Everything hurt, she felt as though her entire body had been meticulously shredded to pieces, in the way that would make it hurt to most. She moved her head, gently, and her eyes rolled back in astonishment.

"Mossypaws?!"

"Ah hey, bud." Mossypaws mewed casually, dabbing her paw into a poultice of brown-green stuff. She let out a wry laugh, "Want to tell me your River*Clan* plans?"

Pebblepaw put her paws onto the nest of moss that she had been

given, wishing desperately that Min or Shimmerclaw, or any non-ThunderClan cat really, would have greeted her.

As she blinked her eyes to adjust to the den light, she turned to look at her flanks. Cobwebs were plastered over long scratches that looked red and angry, while other, smaller cuts criss crossed her flank. *Wow. I didn't realise just how much Darkpaw beat me up.*

"Ya remember what happened?" Mossypaws mewed almost cheerfully, if that was possible.

"Vaguely," Pebblepaw mewed. "You told me, when I arrived, didn't you? I'm a ThunderClan hostage that is going to spend the rest of her life toiling around, bowing to ThunderClan warriors, and doing gross jobs. Also, you told me I was going to die."

"An' ya didn't! I've got a lot of respect for cats like you, who keep on fighting even when they're standing before a thousand enemies."

Pebblepaw blinked, Mossypaws certainly was an odd cat, who she couldn't figure out in the slightest. For one thing, she obviously was a loyal ThunderClan cat, but she was also weirdly friendly and excitable. *She seems almost fun. I just wish we weren't enemies. I wish we didn't have to fight each other with tooth and claw for every scrap of territory.*

Mossypaws blinked at her. "Yer probably gonna go to the hostage den soon. Pity, I missed having a dying cat to dote on." She seemed to be joking, but Pebblepaw didn't like the ominous words 'hostage den' that hung in the air.

"What about my clan, my kin? Have they looked for me?"

Mossypaws shrugged, "the only one that came near our territory was named Bass-somethin' or other. She died, fighting back on Mightystar's advancing patrols. War is in the air, Pebble and you may find yourself forced to attack your own clanmates if you want to live another day."

Pebblepaw winced as the calico she-cat prodded her sharply in the shoulder. She wasn't sure how long she had spent healing in the

ThunderClan medicine den, but apparently she was now sufficiently healed to be taken to the hostage's den. She was now being prodded, and poked on either side by a muscly calico, and a sharp-eyed black tom. The long scratches that criss crossed her flank sent blades of agony through her body as she moved.

"Get a move on!" the calico hissed.

Pebblepaw drooped like a leaf as she was paraded through ThunderClan camp. She thought she saw Boulderpaw with a cat that resembled Darkpaw, but she wasn't sure. The she-cat's face was heavily scarred, so Pebblepaw highly doubted it. She thought of Darkpaw trying to kill her then. *I wish there were cats in the clan who could help her, help the whole lot of us with dealing with our grief in better ways than fury, anxiety, and depression.*

As Pebblepaw was dragged out of camp, she tried to memorise the route in case she could slip out and escape. She was half-dragged, half guided through towering oak and maple trees, and through a slightly marshy area that she could only assume to have once belonged to ShadowClan. As they turned back into true ThunderClan territory, Pebblepaw wondered to herself if they were purposefully traversing a convoluted path that would be difficult to follow.

"Keep on going," the black tom hissed as Pebblepaw stumbled over a root.

He shoved her sharply, and the group was moving again at what Pebblepaw felt to be an even more rapid pace. *Mousedung!* Her lungs were gasping for air from the exertion of walking for an extended period of time, something that she hadn't done since the incident.

She was convinced she was going to pass out, or her paws were going to fall off at the very least, when she was suddenly forced up a sharp incline. At the top there was an abandoned twoleg den. When they reached the top, the cats instantly stopped walking, and the calico let out a throaty purr.

"Welcome to the hostage's den, kitty. I trust you will enjoy your

stay," she mewed with mock kindness.

Pebblepaw took a few seconds to process the horror that was surrounding her. There were about four intimidating, snarling cats that paced around the twoleg den constantly, as though ensuring that no cat got out. As she watched, she was shoved forcefully yet again by the black tom, whose name she had learned to be Clawstorm. *Of all the fierce sounding names!*

"Follow," he meowed, and Pebblepaw was brought forward just in front of the den.

The calico she-cat, Swiftclaw, padded up to a stony faced she-cat that was guarding the den entrance. "Hello, Ravenfire, we come with our newest hostage, Pebblepaw. I trust that you and your fellow Fierce-Protectors will get her caught up on the rules and prepared for usage before the battle?"

Ravenfire didn't speak, merely tilted her head slightly and nodded in ascension.

"Good." Swiftclaw mewed. Turning to the black tom, she added, "We're done here."

The two cats darted away. Pebblepaw noted they were quick to leave the rotting twoleg den, which had the sour scent of unwashed cats coming from it. As Ravenfire nudged Pebblepaw into the den, she mewed. "Wait! Why do you have to do this to me? I'm clan, aren't I?"

"RiverClan cats need to be eliminated," Ravenfire meowed in a monotone voice, as though this was something that had been drilled into her memory. "Only ThunderClan cats deserve to live." With that, she nudged Pebblepaw through a broken glass window and into the twoleg den, and turned away.

What greeted Pebblepaw as she turned into the den was beyond shocking, beyond anything she could have possibly anticipated. Her small grey-pelt fluffed up in horror as she met the stares of over a dozen sullen eyes.

"Greetings, young'un," a bony, old tom padded over to her. To Pebblepaw's astonishment, he wore a kittypet collar around his neck, "name's Mack." he let out a rusty purr, trying and failing horribly to comfort Pebblepaw. "Welcome to the den, I hope you find peace here."

"Peace! Honestly, gramps, there's no peace in being a hostage." Pebblepaw turned to see a young black tom with a white chest with spiky fur. There was scar tissue around his neck from where a kittypet collar likely was once torn off roughly.

"Spike is right," a young she-cat mewed sourly. "I haven't been here long, but these 'Thundercats' ain't what I call friendly.

Pebblepaw padded away as Mack tried desperately to calm the nerves of the two cats, and backed further into the den. She passed a middle-aged tortoiseshell who was jumping around madly, a red and angry lump on the side of her head.

Cats were huddling in the shadows, fearful and anxious. Some smelled sour, while others looked terribly uneasy and underfed. Pebblepaw shook out her pelt, *what can I do for these cats?* She even thought she saw two kits, mewling pitifully beside a mangy pale ginger she-cat.

Pebblepaw was about to turn away, when the she-cat gestured with her tail. "I'm Salamander. Been here the longest of any cat, thought I'd talk to you, newcomer."

Pebblepaw dipped her head to the she-cat. "Greetings," she squeaked out, "are those your kits?"

Salamander shook her head ruefully. "They're 'WindClan,' or so they say."

Pebblepaw sat down. "Why don't the cats here... escape?" she queried.

"There's no escape from these monsters," Salamander meowed submissively. "At one point or another, most fought back, but it's impossible. Soon we'll be used in a battle that doesn't impact any of

us."

Pebblepaw looked down at the two small kits curled up to sleep. "They'll probably even force these young ones to fight. Why wouldn't they?" The mangy she-cat meowed sadly.

As Pebblepaw curled up to sleep in the horrible, stinking two-leg den, thoughts were racing through her head. Pebblepaw saw the way these cats sat, sullen and subdued as though their fate had been decided for them. She thought of Min, Batpaw, and Thornpaw wondering where she was, and lastly she thought of Nightpaw, who had told her she could help, could save lives, if she worked hard. *I want to help. I want the fighting to end.*

Pebblepaw's mind was unconsciously thinking through escape strategies for these tortured cats. *If I become a hero, my legacy will be like that of Moth! A hero who fought for the common good, who risked her life for those in need.*

And yet, as these thoughts raced through Pebblepaw's mind, doubt came too. *I scarcely know these cats, and working solely to raise my legacy I'm the clans isn't right. I need my friends, a plan, and a true, decisive leader.*

Chapter 17

Chapter 17

"So, you're training to be a Swift-Runner?!"

Darkpaw met Boulderpaw's awestruck gaze wondering what was such a big deal. She had just gotten back from her first day of training with Swiftclaw, who had been an astonishingly good mentor. She taught moves efficiently, was straight to the point, and never once lashed out at her unfairly. *Ha, Firbush! Even the loyalist ThunderClan cat ever is a better mentor than you.*

Swiftclaw had very clearly laid out the truth for Darkpaw. She would have to follow Mightystar devoutly, and then everything would be fine. She would become Swift-Runner, and make a life for herself in ThunderClan among the well-respected order of warriors. The alternative would be death, Swiftclaw had made that note exceptionally clear.

On her way back to camp, through the irritably long undergrowth, Darkpaw had vowed to herself that she'd try life in ThunderClan out before making any rash decisions. The cats in ThunderClan weren't... Well they weren't heroes exactly, but they weren't all brainless bad guys either.

"... so anyways on my first day out, Smokeblaze and I became total besties for life. It was so blaze! That's my new catchphrase based on my awesome mentor."

Darkpaw pulled herself out of her murky thoughts and resolutely tried to focus on whatever Boulderpaw was babbling about. *This. Is. Fine.* She tried to convince herself that any of this was normal.

Darkpaw dug her claws into the earth trying to focus simply on ThunderClan camp, and not be swept away by all the memories and complex thoughts that were threatening to overwhelm her. While Boulderpaw chatted with himself, Darkpaw took the time to take in

ThunderClan camp.

Yes, it was a massive fortress in the woods, with walls all enclosed around her, but it was much more than *just* that. *This is normal,* Darkpaw forced the words into her mind that Swiftclaw had been repeating to her all day. *Everything is as it should be.*

A group of Tinypelts were bundling into camp, bouncing nervously on their paws as they were herded in by a young tom named Redmoth. He had been the one to attack Min all those seasons ag- *not important.*

All the Tinypelts' tails were drooping, and they were laden down with burdensome piles of moss, freshkill and other materials. As all the Tinypelts made their way to the centre of the clearing, one of the group broke off and bounded over to Darkpaw and Boulderpaw, laden with fresh moss for bedding. The Tinypelt purred to Boulderpaw as he approached, who abruptly cut off whatever story he had been blabbering on about.

"Creampaw, is that for us? Finally. You can finally make a nest for Darkpaw." Boulderpaw fluffed up his pelt excitedly, and nodded to the shadowy den that the two cats were sitting beside.

Darkpaw dug her claws into the soft earth, glancing at the shadowy den that sat to the right of her. It was neatly made, with vines covering over the entrance, and little prey bones on one side, but it was ominous nonetheless.

"Sure thing, Bo," Creampaw grinned tiredly.

The cream coloured apprentice turned his head to Darkpaw, his blue-green eyes glinting with curiosity. Darkpaw stared at him impassively, keenly taking in all his features. He was a lanky cat, and visibly less fed than Boulderpaw, with ribs showing slightly. On his back was a tight bundle of moss wrapped together. He had something around his waist which seemed to help keep the moss on his back.

"Have we met?" The tom asked, slowly.

Darkpaw shrugged. How was she to know who she had seen and who she hadn't around camp? She was surprised that she couldn't remember seeing him, especially since they must share a den. Creampaw sat down while she looked at him through thoughtful eyes.

"No. Then again, maybe we have and you just weren't that memorable."

To her surprise, Creampaw grinned. "That's exactly what I'm supposed to be, my friend. The ever so unmemorable Creampaw. Your Tinypelt and a failure of an apprentice."

Without any additional preamble, Creampaw got to his paws slowly and began to pad stiff legged through the vines which screened the apprentice's den. He tripped over a small protruding root, and tumbled to the side, letting out a 'wumph.' Darkpaw stared at him with curious narrowed eyes. Before she could process anything more, there was a sound of pawsteps and a cat loomed above her.

"Salutations," the cat said in a squeaky voice that had an added sneer to it.

Darkpaw instantly leaped to her paws and took a pace backward. She glanced around, looking for Boulderpaw, but the tom had sauntered off to the freshkill pile to get some of the freshly brought in prey. Darkpaw fixed her gaze on the tom that stood before her.

"Redclaw," she snarled, as the cream and dark ginger tom looked at her smugly.

"Red*moth,* actually. Just remember, like this kit. I'm a silent killer that is as silent as a moth. Even though I haven't actually killed anycat yet. I'm... working on it, okay." Redmoth looked at her slowly, then turned away. "Whatever. I ain't here for you. Go do something else, okay?"

Before Darkpaw even had a chance to open her jaws to snap a sharp retort back at him, Redmoth charged past her a few tail lengths, his paws kicking up spurts of dust. Darkpaw hacked, and snarled. *Arrogant, fluffbrain. Who calls themselves a killer, and then*

immediately says 'actually I haven't killed anyone yet, sorry.'

She turned to see what had made Redmoth run in such a hurry, turning, she saw him looming over Creampaw with his claws outstretched. His face was twisted in a horrendous snarl, far more intimidating than when he had been talking to Darkpaw. His fur was fluffed up, and his eyes flashed with irritation and frustration. Darkpaw padded a few paw steps closer, curious to hear what made Redmoth despise Creampaw.

"Can you do *nothing* right?" Redmoth was snarling in Creampaw's ear. "First, out on gathering, you're all 'do we really have to kill every piece of freshkill we see,' then you literally turn on me and say that *me,* an Elite, is weak, because I don't carry enough moss."

Darkpaw kneaded her paws into the earth, wondering why Redmoth was being so brutal on Creampaw. She turned, wondering if any of the other cats in the clan would stand up to the young bully.

To her surprise, the clan deputy, Eagletalon, was watching *Redmoth* from narrowed eyes, as though making sure that he punished Creampaw sufficiently. His sharp-eyed gaze locked with hers, and he bared his teeth, revealing ferociously long fangs. *You don't antagonise new members to your group if you want them to follow you, okay?* Darkpaw had to force herself not to roll her eyes at the massive ball of fur, and muscle, with no brain at all. If she became an evil leader, not that she would, she wouldn't go 'murder-all', but instead strategically manipulate her members to loyalty and submission.

Darkpaw switched her gaze back to the fight between Creampaw and Redmoth. Creampaw was trying to give an excuse for what he had done. "The moss fell, I didn't do nothing, so don't go crazy on me. And besides we're ki-"

Redmoth glowered at him, and buried Creampaw's muzzle down into the cold earth. "That changes nothing. Eagletalon is *my* father. Yours is some mangy rogue cat who came into the clan, hooked up with Frostshade enough for her to kit you, Roachpaw, and the *other* one."

Creampaw's reply was so muffled, that Darkpaw couldn't hear it, but Redmoth clearly did, and his eyes flashed with fire. *This is personal,* Darkpaw realised. Redmoth seemed to hiss out every word. "Everycat knows he killed Frostshade. That is why Mightystar killed him, and your third littermate, you fox dunged excuse for a cat. I wish you never existed. You should have died then and there too."

Darkpaw looked at the mess that Redmoth had created. Moss was flung all around, coating both cats, and the ground, but neither seemed to be aware of it. Darkpaw watched as one ball fell from Redmoth's forehead onto his muzzle. With a furious swipe, the tom flicked it away.

Once it fell away, Darkpaw realised that Redmoth had accidentally cut himself. Darkpaw watched his eyes blaze with fury for a moment before flashing back to Creampaw. Quick as a snake, the dark ginger and cream tom sliced a claw through Creampaw. Where, Darkpaw couldn't tell.

Again, she looked around desperately, and this time there were three cats rushing towards the scene. Darkpaw saw Boulderpaw, Swiftclaw, and Eagle Talon racing, their paws pounding towards Darkpaw, and then past her a few tail lengths, to the incident. Darkpaw felt the wind rush beside her as the cats stopped beside Creampaw and Redmoth.

"Redmoth usually ain't so mean. I don't know what got into them. He's an Elite, and the main manager of the Tinypelts, but usually he don't handle them so roughly. I mean, they're no use to us battered and broken." Darkpaw instantly stiffened, only to relax as she realised it was Boulderpaw staring beside her.

His expression was entirely unreadable, although his eyes were rounded. Darkpaw surprised herself by touching her tail lightly on the tom's shoulder. He stiffened, but then glanced at her sadly. "Creampaw's really a good cat. I hope he's all good."

Darkpaw didn't share Boulderpaw's desperate optimism. She didn't really know Creampaw well enough to care. She simply watched the scene unfold before her.

Swiftclaw turned to Redmoth, her green eyes blazing with frustration. "You are an Elite, you are supposed to represent the clan. You don't go hurting Tinypelts, which are still our clanmates, because that is counter-productive. I don't know what happens next, but Eagletalon and I will be watching you very closely."

Eagletalon nodded, draping a tail over Redmoth's shoulder, who hunched his shoulders, and suddenly had the air of a lost kit. He looked sullen and uneasy, as he stared, wide-eyed at Eagletalon, as though looking for the answer on what to do. Darkpaw was reminded of the time he had attacked Min, and this time she couldn't stop mentally replaying the first fight she had been a part of.

Redmoth had been just an apprentice, then, she realised. The way all of the cats had treated him had been really unique, though. Darkpaw thought of the way the ThunderClan camp always seemed to be under pressure to conform to standards, be submissive to Mightystar, and not become a Tinypelt. She wondered, almost fearfully how she would have turned out if she had been raised in ThunderClan as Eagletalon's daughter.

Darkpaw switched her gaze back to the conflict that lay in front of her, and to her surprise, Swiftclaw was already turning away. She gave Boulderpaw and Darkpaw a swift nod as she whisked away. Darkpaw glanced at Boulderpaw, awkwardly realised that her tail was still on his shoulder, and quickly let it drop.

Redmoth was being guided away by Eagle Talon towards the exit of camp. Eagletalon's gaze was furious and sympathetic all at the same time, while Redmoth just looked crestfallen. Just before Eagletalon reached the barrier that screened the exit to the camp, he let out a commanding yowl.

"Mossypaws! Get yourself over here to deal with the broken Tinypelt."

Darkpaw turned back to Boulderpaw, and realised that he was lying in front of Creampaw, murmuring in his ear softly. Darkpaw raced over the dirt to join her clanmate, curious to see how Creampaw looked.

The apprentice had a jagged slash from one ear tip all the way down to his neck. Blood was pulsing out, turning the green moss around him red. He was moaning softly, though his eyes were closed, he moved his paw closer to touch Boulderpaw. The grey apprentice sighed heavily, and for a moment Darkpaw wondered if he was upset that Creampaw's blood had ruined the moss that was supposed to have been fresh nests.

Then, she turned and realised that Boulderpaw's eyes were wet. He gently nudged Creampaw, with one paw, murmuring in his ear. He bent low, and got the semi-conscious tom onto his back with all limbs splayed out.

"Off we go, then," Boulderpaw mewed softly, as though encouraging Creampaw to hold on.

Darkpaw watched as he padded unsteadily to the medicine den, and deposited Creampaw inside. She sat still, expecting Boulderpaw to rush back to her, and continue whatever mousebrained story he had been blabbering on about, but to her surprise, Boulderpaw raced right out of camp.

"So we meet again." Darkpaw turned to Roachpaw and Scarletpaw padding toward her, through narrowed eyes. Scarletpaw was sneering at her.

Scarletpaw let out a hiss, and turned away as though she didn't want to associate herself with Darkpaw. Roachpaw, though, stayed put, with a curious expression on her face. "Hey, there, I thought I would introduce myself to you."

Darkpaw was surprised by Roachpaws's oddly relaxed tone. Boulderpaw had described the she-cat as ThunderClan's dream warrior: cold, calculating, and *never* afraid to show her claws.

"Er, hey." Darkpaw began awkwardly.

Roachpaw was beginning to walk away, but turned, a surprisingly warm look kindling in her eyes. "Walk with me," she offered.

Darkpaw glanced into Roachpaw's eyes, wondering what the she-cat

was getting at. When she saw Roachpaw gesturing to the fresh-kill pile, Darkpaw realised what the she-cat wanted. *Great. Sharing ThunderClan crowfood.*

Darkpaw padded toward the fresh-kill pile, trailing a few pawsteps behind Roachpaw. She knew that if she was going to become a trustworthy ThunderClan warrior, she would have to become acquaintances with her denmates.

As they neared the fresh-kill pile, Roachpaw picked up a squirrel. Darkpaw noticed that there was a fish on the freshkill pile, and when she looked up, she saw several cats eyeing her suspiciously. Darkpaw knew that if she took the fish, which looked much more appetising than everything else there, cats would guess she was still loyal to RiverClan. Pushing back her discomfort, Darkpaw picked up a shrivelled vole that looked as though it had been in the sun for hours.

As she gripped it in her teeth, she heard Roachpaw mew in amusement. "Oh, you daft cat! That's for the Tinypelts."

Several mews of amusement eddied around the crowd or cats which had gathered around the fresh-kill pile.

"I always knew theirs were as flea-brained as the fish they eat," a young brown tom with a clawed chest mewed. "Immagine, picking *Tinypelt* prey."

Darkpaw dropped the shrivelled piece of prey to the leafy floor. Almost instantly, a scrawny black tom darted toward the prey. His ribs were showing as he grabbed the vole hungrily. Darkpaw watched as he grabbed the vole tightly in his jaws.

The brown tom with the clawed chest leaped at him, claws outstretched. "Low life! Wait your turn. Just 'cause I said it's Tinypelt crowfood, don't mean you can eat ahead of your turn."

The tom dodged the blow and raced away. He dropped the vole and ran, fear scent radiating off him in waves. "Sorry, Clawheart! I won't again... promise."

Before the brown tom could bunch his muscles and leap at the Tinypelt, the black tom had raced out of the hollow. A chuckle edied around the group of cats as their fur began to lie flat. Darkpaw quickly picked up a plump sparrow and followed Roachpaw out of the circle of muscular, well-fed cats.

To her disappointment, Roachpaw sat beside Scarletpaw just outside of the hunched circle of warriors. She narrowed her eyes, and flicked her tail at Darkpaw.

Scarletpaw was glowering out at Darkpaw with outright hostility. "I wish I had clawed you when I had the chance," she muttered under her breath. "Now everything stinks of *fish."*

Roachpaw looked unimpressed at Scarletpaw's hostility. "Mightystar chose her to be a clanmate," she hissed to Scarletpaw. "And she's the glorious StarClan hailed leader of ThunderClan."

Darkpaw stared at Roachpaw curiously, trying to figure out if Roachpaw could be an ally to her. But, the more time she spent with the cat, the more she realised that Roachpaw was a smart cat. She guessed that Roachpaw's kindness and amiability wasn't coming from the heart, but instead from a sense of duty to follow the progress of her integration to ThunderClan.

Roachpaw's gaze glittered coldly as she stared at the Medicine Den. "I heard Boulderpaw was helping the Tinypelt failure," she mewed irritably. "He should watch it, unless he wants to be a Tinypelt."

Darkpaw glanced at Roachpaw. *Creampaw is her brother...* "I thought Tinypelts were you- our clanmates."

Roachpaw rolled her eyes. "They're hardly better than rogues, especially *that* one. I'd give anything to make him disappear."

Scarletpaw rolled her eyes. "That would mean more carrion work for us," she pointed out.

Roachpaw shrugged. "Sure, but that cat. I mean, we all know he's a *traitor*. He's honestly better off dead."

Almost instantly after she said that, a screech of agony sounded

from the Medicine Den. Roachpaw looked at the den brightly, and Scarletpaw rolled her eyes.

Darkpaw blinked uneasily as she thought of the word *traitor*. She thought that that was exactly what she was. Surrounded by enemies who treated her like a friend. Caught between loyalty to where she had been born, and where she could survive. Darkpaw knew with a sickening lurch in her stomach that this was only the beginning of the horrors she was going to witness in ThunderClan.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18

Darkpaw stared toward the entrance of ThunderClan camp, a vigilant expression on her face. Beside her stood a massive dark brown tom with a scowl on his face that reminded her so much of her mentor Firbush. *And that's a perfectly awful thing!* Darkpaw thought Firbush must have been a ThunderClan cat in another life. It would explain his general attitude. Darkpaw let out an enormous yawn.

"And what do you think you're doing?" The tom hissed shortly.

"What I think you mean is great job, traitor Darkpaw," Darkpaw meowed tartly. "I'm standing guard in front of your foxdunged territory looking for any sort of disloyalty from your own cats."

The tom nudged her sharply. "Mightystar may have let you out of the hostage den, but that doesn't mean you of all cats can bully me. I'm not just an Elite, but the deputy of ThunderClan."

The hostage den... That remark made Darkpaw's ice turn cold, as she thought of watching Pebblepaw stumble listlessly toward the hostage's den and certain doom. Oddly, her bloodlust towards Pebblepaw had vanished almost entirely, and the thought of having at least one RiverClan cat in this strange land was comforting. *StarClan, who am I and what do I stand for now?*

As Darkpaw surveyed the camp, she wished desperately for some form of direction, some cat other than Mightystar telling her right from wrong. *I don't know who I am anymore?* Her obsession in harming Pebblepaw for Nightpaw's death was fulfilled and Darkpaw was left with an odd feeling of emptiness. *I'm not a good cat, but I'm not evil. Is there an in between, or will I inevitably fall on the evil side of the fence?*

"So... about this Elite," Darkpaw meowed casually. "What is it?"

If she was going to stay in ThunderClan, she may as well get to know how their cat society worked. The brown tom, Eagletalon, stiffened. In Darkpaw's opinion, he wasn't very smart. He was pure muscle, with no brain in him at all.

"The Elite is the group of cats that are the most respected in the clan. In it is the head of each sect, for example Swiftclaw, head of the Swift-Runners. Then, there's the leader and deputy of course, and a few other senior, well respected warriors."

Darkpaw wasn't impressed. "So you took the senior warriors and called them the 'Elite' instead because ThunderClan is so very imaginative and unique."

The Eagletalon glowered at her. Darkpaw found it amusing how just about half the clan were very big, and very angry cats. She turned back to survey the clan, her mind flitting back to her recent meeting with Mightystar.

"You're all settled in now?" the clan leader had asked, not meeting the eyes of Darkpaw, when Darkpaw had been summoned to her den.

"Yeah."

Mightystar had spoken in her high pitched voice, "You know, Darkpaw, I've been wondering if there are any of your fellow clanmates that are completely loyal to you, who would enjoy being on the winner's side of this battle."

Darkpaw had hesitated, "the fellow apprentices of RiverClan once saw me as their leader. Maybe they could come?"

"Perhaps." Mightystar purred. "I could use a few more Tinypelts. They could be yours to train and guide. I feel like I've known you for ages, Darkpaw. You remind me of myself when I was young. You are dism..."

Darkpaw was instantly shot out of her doze by a rough shove from the clan deputy. "Are you up for the border patrol, apprentice?" he sneered. "Or do you just want to laze around in the sun like a

worthless kittypet. Maybe you can help us steal those RiverClan apprentices, they all hide in holes, afraid of the big scary ThunderClan."

Glowering at him, Darkpaw snapped. "Of course I'll go on a foxdunged border patrol. After all, you must be ever so pleased to flex that I have ThunderClan stink all over me now."

It was almost amusing to throw her weight around in ThunderClan camp after she had seen what Mightystar had done to the one tom, Nettleclaw, who had bullied her. She was half certain that the tom had never even made it to the hostage's den, and was bleeding to death in a ditch somewhere. Oddly, that thought didn't make her as happy as she thought it would, and she instead felt uneasy. *Would Mightystar do that to me? After all she did claw half my face off.*

"Who else is coming! Oh is that Darkpaw I see? This is going to be epic! I love patrols almost as much as I love my new clanmate. Do you love Darkpaw so very much Smokeblaze? Of course you do, who wouldn't love an fiery she-cat?"

Boulderpaw. Darkpaw let out a sigh of exasperation towards the apprentice. He chatted so much, and yet Darkpaw had seen that literally no cat in camp paid any attention to him, besides when they would snarl at him.

"Keep the apprentice's jaws shut, Smokeblaze," Eagletalon hissed, making his way towards the bramble barrier that enclosed the camp. "And if it helps his jaws to stay closed, Ravenfire, Darkpaw, me, you, and Boulderpaw are patrolling."

Smokeblaze snarled at Boulderpaw, although Darkpaw had learned that it was really just for show. "Open those big jaws of yours once more, and you'll have an even bigger scar on the side of your face than Darkpaw has."

That closed Boulderpaw's mouth for a few moments, as the cats filed out of camp and into the oak forest. Despite that, Darkpaw had a feeling that Boulderpaw wasn't chastised, but instead wondering whether he would look cool and tough with a face scar.

The oaks were colourful and bright, with reds and oranges and yellows. Leaves swayed and rustled in the breeze, and for a split second, Darkpaw wanted to chase the rosy red leaf billowing in the breeze at the corner of her vision. She and Boulderpaw raced to catch up to patrol, and Darkpaw noted that the hostage's den Fierce-Protector, Ravenfire, was with the patrol.

Boulderpaw darted over to the black and ginger she-cat, letting out a mrow of excitement. *Does he ever get depressed,* Darkpaw wondered. She was about to catch up with Smokeblaze, when she heard Boulderpaw mew to her left, "How are the hostage's doing? Can I have a couple to fight beside me during the battle? I think I'd look really cool if I battled with a hostage in tow."

Darkpaw raced toward the two cats, almost slipping over a protruding root in her curiosity to hear Ravenfire's words. *Pebblepaw's there... I wonder how she's doing.* Darkpaw snarled at herself. *Foxdung to that. She's a worthless murderer, and yet, she's all I have here.*

Just as she caught up, racing through the field of maples and oaks, Ravenfire meowed. "Quite well, my brother's kit. It's fun to train them, especially the kittypets and the kits. They're so gullible and easy to train to follow our every command. We'll be able to use them to win the battle against RiverClan easily, and we won't even get a scrape."

Darkpaw caught up and asked, trying to sound bright. "Why do you have so many hostages and Tinypelts?"

Ravenfire shot her an alarmed look, while Boulderpaw let out a small mrow of laughter. "So we don't have to do all the hard stuff, silly," he purred. "So that we can have cats to dominate. So that we can eliminate the other clans and rule the forest."

Ravenfire blinked, reciting old words. "As morbid as it sounds, you can only bring yourself up by putting others down."

"True words," Darkpaw muttered.

As the cats padded along in silence and Darkpaw thought about

what the cats had just said. *It's true. When Pebblepaw was always better than me at everything, I wanted so desperately to eliminate her. Troutstar practically worshipped her and I was jealous.* She shook those thoughts away with an irritable lash of her tail. *Pebblepaw's a murderer, right? She deserved it all, right?*

And yet, as the cats padded through the leaf-bare pine forest, Darkpaw was painfully aware that she was lying to herself. The truth was, she didn't really know who she was anymore. Was she Darkpaw, the RiverClan apprentice? The RiverClan traitor? The ThunderClan Swift-Runner? *Or... the nearly murderer.*

The cats neared a short ridge, and Darkpaw instantly took in a sharp intake of breath. She knew where she was. The crimson forest. The sharp hill. Her claws prepare to slash Pebblepaw's throat.

"This is where you died, isn't it?" Boulderpaw meowed in a surprisingly sympathetic tone. "I wasn't part of the patrol, but I sure heard lots from my littermate, Scarletpaw about it."

Darkpaw stared at the tree where she had cornered Pebblepaw. "But, I-I didn't die..." she murmured.

The other cats were padding up the slope to continue the patrol, but Boulderpaw stood back, looking at her, his eyes oddly perceptive.

"You did, though." He meowed, almost argumentatively. "Your past self died here, and your new life, your life as a ThunderClan warrior began.

Darkpaw didn't speak, merely padding up beside a bright, towering oak. It was where she had lain atop Pebblepaw, where she had tried to deal the killing blow. Where Pebblepaw would have met an untimely end had it not been for the coincidence that a ThunderClan patrol was in the area.

But Pebblepaw's a murderer. She killed my brother. She's a horrible cat. Darkpaw closed her eyes, wishing desperately for darkness to seep into her vision. She wanted to know what was right, what was wrong. She buried her muzzle deep into the grass, and thought she

scented the sharp tang of Pebblepaw's blood.

She's awful. She's bad. I did the right thing by trying to kill her. As Darkpaw sat surrounded in only darkness, with no light at all, she thought she heard a voice. Perhaps it was only a distant memory, or perhaps a voice had spoken to her in the blackness, but Darkpaw knew that she heard the friendly voice of her late brother, Nightpaw. '*Remember what I said when I was a kit?'*

Darkpaw choked on the next words. Her jaws were trying to move, but oddly none of her muscles seemed to be working. The words sounded in Darkpaw's mind. *'We're going to make mistakes and sometimes get others hurt. We have got to keep going though, and not go too hard on each other."*

Now, Darkpaw lay in blackness, a ThunderClan cat on her left, in a clearing where she had attempted and almost successfully murdered a cheerful, anxious apprentice. Her only thought at that moment was. *Great StarClan, where did it all go so wrong?*

"Y-you're right," Darkpaw choked out. "I did die. I really did die. But it wasn't ThunderClan that swung the killing blow; I killed myself."

She wanted it all to be over, all the pain, the confusion, the uncertainty, but as she opened her eyes, Boulderpaw was still sitting near her, a little bit away. As the last of the darkness lifted from Darkpaw's vision, she realised she was in the same place; and that nothing had changed. She had had no life altering vision, no great heroic moment, and yet...

This is who I am; who I want to be. Don't I, don't I like the way things are going?

"It doesn't get better very quickly, does it?" Boulderpaw meowed when the silence had gone on for more than a few moments. "I sorta kinda get it. Not really, but you know? There was this battle with WindClan a few moons back. I was basically a fresh apprentice, and there was this old WindClan she-cat. We fought, but then I slashed my claws over her throat and probably sorta killed her. Was it an accident, I wish I knew."

Darkpaw looked at him, standing up on trembling paws. *Great StarClan why am I being weak, and to a ThunderClan cat of all things?* "So you ended her, so what?" She meowed, then added, "ThunderClan loves that, don't they."

Boulderpaw hesitated, which immensely surprised Darkpaw. "You would think that it would make a cat feel good, to hurt an enemy. You would think, but it's different actually being there, watching her pain. I don't really think I was ever the same cat after that."

"Oh?" Darkpaw meowed, idly trying to figure out where the patrol had gone.

"Yeah, I mean now I just fill any bit of silence because I don't want to think too hard about it. Honest, I don't want to think too hard about anything happening in my clan. It's best to just follow along in the background; you don't get hurt that way," Boulderpaw muttered.

He gave Darkpaw a rueful smile with his lopsided face. Darkpaw stared blankly at him, and at the leaves which swirled at the corner of her vision.

That was when the two of them heard a screech coming from atop the hill. Boulderpaw widened his eyes at Darkpaw, and then began to race up the slope, propelling his massive well-muscled legs as quickly as he could go. Darkpaw chased after him. *It's so weird how life keeps on going, as though we weren't just breaking down in front of each other.*

As Darkpaw followed in Boulderpaw's tracks up the hill, she was keenly aware that they were heading up the hill and towards ThunderClan territory. She tried not to think about Pebblepaw, rolling down this hill what felt like seasons ago.

As she crested the ridge, she saw Smokeblaze, Eagletalon and Ravenfire fiercely battling with what appeared to be a RiverClan patrol. The cats were tussling in the grass on the RiverClan and ThunderClan border.

"Useless apprentices," Eagletalon snarled, battering at the ears of a

hissing tom that looked like Carptuft. "Where were you?"

"Sorry, sorry sorry!" Boulderpaw announced, rounding his eyes, and then he was leaping straight onto the back of a tall white and grey tom... *Batpaw?*

As Darkpaw stood, motionless, on the edge of the battle, she took in everything that was going on. Brightclaw, a senior warrior, was laying on her back, groaning as Ravenfire scored deep gashes along her flanks. Batpaw was clawing desperately at Boulderpaw and Smokeblaze, while his mentor Sparkmist jumped about wildly on the back of Smokeblaze. Eagletalon was purring as he advanced on Thornpaw who had been racing toward the edge of the battle, a wad of cobweb and marigold in her jaws.

"Darkpaw!" Eagletalon snapped. "Come, show your true loyalty to ThunderClan and get this little Medicine Cat for me."

Darkpaw froze as the shrieks of battle seemed to stop, and all the cats stared at her, except for Brightclaw who had passed out. Boulderpaw's gaze was imploring. Batpaw's gaze was cold and hard. Smokeblaze looked almost pitying. And Eagletalon, he looked menacing.

Reluctantly, Darkpaw trotted over the RiverClan scent markers and through the long withering brown-green grass to reach Eagletalon. She felt the eyes of all the cats watching her, waiting. Darkpaw would have to make a choice, and assert her loyalty. *My old and rotting dying clan, or this new clan where I could come to power.* Darkpaw knew that every cat in this battle had an opinion on what she should do, what was right and what was wrong.

Quick as a snake, Eagletalon leaped atop Thornpaw, and put his salivating jaws right under Thornpaw's neck. Darkpaw felt the ground sway as she narrowed her eyes. Both cats would despise her if she hesitated. She would have to make a choice.

"Why don't you hurt *it*, Darkpaw?" Eagletalon let out a malicious purr. The deputy looked at her through curious narrowed eyes.

"No!" Batpaw screeched from somewhere behind Darkpaw. He

swung his claws at Boulderpaw's neck before the grey tom could react. Blood dribbled out from the new gash. Despite the immense pain the ThunderClan apprentice must be feeling, he held onto the wriggling Batpaw and they both looked up at Darkpaw.

Of all the foxdunged carrion! When was I so mousebrained as to think that everything in this world is black and white. Ally with RiverClan and her friends, and she would almost certainly die. Ally with ThunderClan, and she would be evil. Darkpaw wasn't evil, but she was smart, and a thought quickly flitted into her head.

"Oh, Eagletalon!" Darkpaw put on an exasperated voice. "Are you really so narrow minded as to think that I would kill my own allies?"

That certainly got Eagletalon's attention. "I always knew you would align yourself with RiverClan, what a poor, pathetic coward who's about to get hurt."

"No, wait!" Darkpaw hissed as Eagletalon bunched his muscles to spring at her. "What I meant is that these cats are completely loyal to me." She padded smugly toward Eagletalon. "They could be used as Tinypelts in ThunderClan."

Eagletalon rounded on her, more curious than hostile now. "I thought Medicine Cats were smart," he meowed, nodding to Thornpaw.

You would think that, mousebrain, Darkpaw wanted to tell him. Instead, she meowed, "They are, but if you guide and train them from a young age, they can grow to be completely clueless and loyal to you."

Thornpaw's eyes flashed, and for a second Darkpaw wondered if she would say that Darkpaw wasn't telling the *full* truth. *Now that, that would certainly be mousebrained.*

Instead, Thornpaw let out a throaty purr from beneath Batpaw. "Why didn't you return home after you killed Pebblepaw? Didn't you care about my littermate and I? We were so very lost without you, not knowing what to do and all."

She sounded so not like Thornpaw that Darkpaw was taken aback. Thornpaw was such an exceptionally independent and wise cat that Darkpaw was afraid that Eagletalon would see through her trickery. Instead, Eagletalon was looking thoughtful. "Young cats are so very gullible and easy to manipulate," he let out a malicious purr, looking at Darkpaw.

He thinks I'm the mousebrain here. Darkpaw dipped her head in acquiescence of Eagletalon's words, meanwhile the battling cats looked at each other uneasily. "I've missed having cats to boss around," she sneered. "I'll take the two apprentices with me."

Eagletalon purred yet again. "Sometimes you forget you're just an apprentice yourself, kitty. As for the *others,* let's put them in the hostage den."

That instantly got the battle back into full swing. Darkpaw watched as Carptuft and Sparkmist fought viciously for their freedom, and the freedom of the younger cats. They were probably at a loss for what Eagletalon had been talking about since ThunderClan was seriously weird, but finally it had clued in that they could be taken hostage.

Darkpaw turned back to the battlefield. *If I pin down Batpaw, and Eaglethorn pins Thornpaw, then the others can be driven away.* She pushed past Sparkmist clawing tufts of fur off of Smokeblaze, and leaped onto Batpaw furiously. She nodded to Boulderpaw and he let go of the tom's legs, still gagging on blood from his neck wound. *How dare Batpaw! How dare Boulderpaw!*

Batpaw glowered up at her, fury in his amber eyes. "I thought you were angry, but not evil."

Darkpaw buried his muzzle into the grass. He wasn't supposed to fight her so outright. Of all cats, she would have thought that Batpaw would be able to hold onto his emotions. She stood over him, putting all her energy into pinning him down. The battle raged around her, but Darkpaw focussed on Batpaw's angry, betrayed eyes.

"Deal with it," she hissed and spat at his face.

For what felt like an eternity, the two cats sat there, or Darkpaw sat on Batpaw. They glowered at each other. Eventually, Darkpaw was aware of the sounds of battle dying away. She looked away from Batpaw and up.

"I guess we'll need a few of you alive to tell the rest of your flea-infested clan that we're taking this strip of territory. Also, prepare for war," Eagletalon announced in a casual tone.

Carptuft was limping badly, and Sparkmist was favouring one paw over the other, her left ear torn to shreds. Darkpaw was upset to see the two most positive and excitable cats she knew in such a state. She looked for Brightclaw, and then saw the she-cat, sitting up stiffly in a pool of blood.

The two cats raced away, their eyes bright with fear and anxiety, Brightclaw limping behind them, blood oozing from a neck wound. It was clear to every cat that the senior warrior was going to die. Sparkmist turned back and meowed. "We'll get you two back soon, pals. Don't fret."

Carptuft turned back as well, his gaze icy as it fixed on Darkpaw. "I will avenge my littermate's death, but I won't go as low as to *kill* any cat."

With that, the two warriors were gone. Batpaw grunted from underneath Darkpaw. "Let me up, oh great one," he meowed.

Darkpaw shrugged and moved away. Her own 'clanmates' were the worse for wear as well. Smokeblaze had a nasty cut over his eye, and Boulderpaw... where was Boulderpaw? Darkpaw looked around.

"Over here. Wow, that white tom has sharp claws. Do you think he hurt me bad, Darkpaw? How do I look?"

Darkpaw turned to see Boulderpaw at the bottom of the sharp incline. She ran down to him, a gash was running the line of his neck, but it didn't look fatal.

"Darkpaw? I forgot to tell you," Boulderpaw meowed. "I don't like

this, fighting others. Sure, I'm big and good at it, but... it's just *wrong,* you know?"

"Yeah." Darkpaw surveyed the mess of the battle, and had a sudden feeling of decision. I know what's right, and what's wrong now. As she looked up the slope to Batpaw and Thornpaw being roughly guided down, she turned to the bleeding Boulderpaw.

I don't trust anyone. How can I, when everyone is so awful to each other. There are so many cats trying to tell me what I should be, who *I should be. And the truth is, I don't know yet. But there is one thing I know. I will fight to my last breath if it means that all these cats I really do sort-of care about get to live.*

Chapter 19

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"I think this one is broken."

Pebblepaw looked up to see the smirking small brown and cream tom who was shoving her from behind. She had only stopped for a drink from a small puddle of water, but it seemed that these cats could care less about the well-being of their 'hostages.'

The small tom poked her from behind, "are you even listening?" he sniffed. "We're doing you a service, you know, letting you come here instead of being driven out with the rest of your ex-clan."

Pebblepaw muttered out a small, "sorry," and hurried to catch up with the rest of the cats.

They were apparently going out to a sandy hollow to do training for the battle with ThunderClan. It was clear that all the cats felt a deep sinking weight in the pit of their bellies. Everything was going downhill. Pebblepaw watched as the two young WindClan kits jumped up and down at Mack's paws, excited for the training.

"I'm so glad we're getting out of the stinky den!" Dewykit squealed.

"Do you think we'll have to be mean and scary like the Thundercats?" That was Lavenderkit's anxious mew.

For the past quarter moon, Pebblepaw had been thinking, planning. She wanted to go home to where things weren't so bad, but more than that she wanted to help out all the cats in need. So far though, all her mini patrols around the two-leg den had proved futile; there was no sneaky exit. She felt so forlorn, and desperately missed the cheerful smile and easy happiness of Min.

I'll keep on fighting until I have nothing left to give to keep my friends safe from these cats. Pebblepaw continued padding forward through

the oaks and occasional pine. She looked up from her daze to see a massive sandy clearing, Ravenfire and a few other ThunderClan Fierce-Protectors and Swift-Runners looked up brightly.

Pebblepaw winced as she slipped on a pebble and slid, unceremoniously, into the sandy hollow. She was training with Mike, Spike, Blue, and the kits. It had been made painfully aware to her that these kits were going to be used in some way in the battle. *Not if I can help it!* Pebblepaw would die before these kits were hurt. They were so young, so innocent, and they weren't likely to live.

"So, y'alls know the drill," an old scarred blue-grey tom named Cloudstorm meowed. When no cat spoke, he snapped, "let's get to it!"

Lavenderkit pressed up against Pebblepaw, her indigo eyes round. "Do we really have to fight?" she meowed.

Cloudstorm fluffed up his pelt. "Yes, you do." he snarled. "All cats must contribute regardless of size, just as our magnificent leader, Mightystar, has always done."

All the hostages, even the kits, dipped their heads and meowed. "Mightystar is so wise and noble."

With that the training exercise would soon begin. Pebblepaw had only been through it twice, but she knew the drill. The hostages would team up with one Fierce-Protector, and they would 'guide' them to fight the rest of the ThunderClan warriors.

Ravenfire blinked casually. "Let's see, I'll take the RiverClan apprentice and the kits. See how they fare against the rest of you."

"What?" Dewykit meowed, scraping at the sand excitedly with his paws. "What're we doing-ing?"

Ravenfire sniffed. "I said, you're *fighting* with these cats and with *me* as your guide,

mouebrained kit."

Ravenfire had always disliked that Dewykit was a bit hard of

hearing, seeing it as an imperfection. Pebblepaw didn't mind, it just meant that she needed to speak up when talking to the kit.

"Alright! Let's go, go, go!" Dewykit squealed, scrambling to his paws. Even still, he was half the size of Pebblepaw.

Ravenfire rolled her eyes and gently poked and shoved Pebblepaw to the opposite side of the clearing from the ThunderClan warriors. When she arrived, Pebblepaw took in her opponents. *Cloudstorm, Roachpaw, Snapfang, Brownspike.* They were all fearsome and intimidating warriors to be up against. The goal of the battle was to stay alive and not get hurt. ThunderClan warriors fought with claws unsheathed, meaning that it was easy to draw blood, making it a 'more realistic circumstance.' She had heard from Mack that a mangy rogue, that none of the cats had really liked, had died here, in training.

Pebblepaw looked to Lavenderkit who was hiding between her paws and tail tucked under. Dewykit was bouncing up and down eagerly. All the ThunderClan warriors looked excited and malicious, and Pebblepaw was painfully aware of how dangerous this was for the kits.

"GO!" Ravenfire let out a sharp yowl to commence the 'mock' battle.

Instantly, Roachpaw was racing forward, her lips twisted into a horrendous snarl. "For Mightystar!" she cheered as she swung a blow at Pebblepaw which the grey apprentice only just missed.

Pebblepaw ducked, but as she did, she came face-to-face with the young tom, Snapfang. He looked almost pitying as he swung a blow at her with unsheathed claws. The blow nicked Pebblepaw's ear as she dodged. She leaped at him and dug her claws into his back.

StarClan, no! After Darkpaw, I don't think I'll ever truly be able to hurt another cat again. Snapfang swung her off, and pinned her to the ground, letting out a triumphant grunt. Pebblepaw would have stopped fighting there if she could, but then she saw the kits. They were cornered by Roachpaw, Cloudstorm, and Brownspike. Ravenfire sat there, looking at the hostages she was 'guiding' with a disgruntled look on her ginger and black face.

She's not going to fight for them, why should she? Pebblepaw could practically hear Ravenfire's response in her head. *If they're weak, they're useless anyway.*

Pebblepaw leaped, but she was too late for the kits. Brownspike slashed at Lavenderkit's face, and as she reeled back in pain, Dewykit leaped atop the massive tom's back. She raced to them, and let out a ferocious snarl, leaping with outstretched claws at Roachpaw.

I'll never forgive myself if another cat dies because of my own mousehearted mistakes!"

Pebblepaw was limping into the two-leg den, blood trickling from a nasty shoulder wound that Roachpaw had given her. The two kits were laying on Mack's back, as the friendly kittypet carried them inside the rotting den.

Pebblepaw missed being able to have any control over life. Now, she felt trapped in her own body, watching the horrors around her, helpless.

Ravenfire blinked as the cats were pushed through the window of the two-leg den. "Let me know if you need anything." And then she too was gone, and Pebblepaw switched her gaze back to the hostage's den.

"There ya go, little pals," Mack purred as he slid the two kits off of his silver-grey back. "Now ya can have a little kitten rest, it's all over for now."

Pebblepaw turned to the kits as Mack padded to the back of the den, jaws agape in tiredness. She was utterly horrified by the state that the two kits were in. Dewykit was groaning, little scratches all over his kit pelt, but Lavenderkit's eyes were tight shut and she groaned with pain, a long scratch on her side. Pebblepaw touched her, alarmed to already feel heat pulsing from the little kit's forehead. The wound was muddy, and Pebblepaw knew that infection would soon arrive.

"Is she good?" Dewykit asked with his round eager kit eyes.

"No." Pebblepaw mewed simply and flopped over, exhausted from the battle.

"Pebby, Pebby! Lavenderkit is upset!" Pebblepaw blinked open her eyes, into pale dawn light. *Moudedung! I overslept.*

She nudged the little kit, and found even more heat coming from her pelt. Dewykit was touching his littermate fearfully.

"Ravenfire!" Pebblepaw called from inside the two-leg den. The ginger and black she-cat wasn't kind, but she wasn't the nastiest cat either.

"What d'ya want, hostage?" Pebblepaw sighed. *Redmoth.* The cat who had attacked Min all those moons ago, now an Elite.

"Lavenderkit's hurting," Pebblepaw called.

"Not my problem. Now leave me alone."

As Pebblepaw paced in the den, her tail flicking to and fro, she had no idea what to do. *Nightpaw told me to stay strong, but I've given all I can.* Pebblepaw flopped down in the den, feeling utterly hopeless, and feeling like she couldn't control anything. She would probably have lain there forever if not for a bright voice.

"Peb?!"

Pebblepaw looked up, it couldn't be, and yet it was. As she turned around, Pebblepaw saw a fluffy grey she-cat with her open eyes and broad smile at the back of the den. Pebblepaw stared blankly for a few seconds. It was and yet, it couldn't be... *Min? Here?*

The two cats practically raced for each other, stumbling over loose debris and a sleeping rogue tom. They almost leaped at each other, and embraced. Min buried her nose into Min's fur and scented RiverClan scent for the first time in what felt like moons.

"Peb, I was so worried. So very, very worried. We all thought you... gone and Darkpaw a traitor." Min's voice quavered as she spoke.

Pebblepaw couldn't find words, merely choked as she buried her

muzzle deep into Min's fur. How long had it been since she had seen a familiar, friendly face? Pebblepaw didn't let go, for fear that Min would evaporate just like the rest of her life had.

"Peb, I'm so sorry. Thor and Bat got trapped by the Thundercats too, and I did a daring rescue mission. Can't say it went perfectly, though. Ran into this massive dark brown Thundercat and he picked me up like a kit and tossed me in here."

Pebblepaw felt tears streaming down her face. For the first time in moons, the world seemed a little brighter, the strain on her heart a little less. All she could manage out was "thank you, Min. Thank you for caring."

When the two cats got out of their solid embrace, Pebblepaw suddenly remembered Dewykit and Lavenderkit. "I don't think I have control over anything anymore, not even my own life," Pebblepaw murmured.

"You just have to do your best," Min mewed. "That's all any of us can do, together. "

Together... Pebblepaw's tail shot up straight, an idea suddenly flashing into her mind. *Of course! Why did I never think of this before?*

She bolted over to Dewykit and Lavenderkit. Min raced just behind her. Pebblepaw turned to Min. "Min, can you gather all the cats at the back of the den for me?"

Min blinked at her, "sure I can, Peb, anything to get out of this stinky den... and help you." she added brightly

Pebblepaw sat down beside Lavenderkit and Dewykit. "You're going home," she mewed, forcing confidence into her voice. "Sit on top of me."

This will work, it has too. It's all coming down to this. Time to fight or die trying.

The cats sat, assembled in a ragged half circle around Pebblepaw. It had taken Min and her a surprisingly long time to coax many of the

cats out of their hiding places, and persuade cranky and tired cats to join. Once they had all gathered in the back of the den, about fifteen, Pebblepaw looked to Min. Min nodded brightly, and Pebblepaw opened her jaws to speak.

"You see this kit," she nodded to Lavenderkit. "She needs help from us, she needs to get out of here."

"Yeah! If it were that easy to escape, we'd all be gone," a scruffy orange tom named Bark muttered, "we'd all be safe and gone."

"It's hopeless," a black tom agreed.

"Listen, to me, please," Pebblepaw meowed. "I think that we can get out if we all work together. Salamander," Pebblepaw mewed. "Do you want to lead the discussion?"

Salamander seemed to shrink beneath her pelt as all the cats' eyes turned to look at her. "No, I think we should all just work together. No leader, and certainly not *me*."

Min spoke up. "Every cat has had their own unique experiences and stuff, let's use our differences to our own advantage."

Diversity. Pebblepaw liked the ring of that. *It does make cats harder to understand and relate to, but it means that if we all put our heads together, there must be an escape.*

All the cats perked up at Min's words. "Yes," Pebblepaw meowed. "None of us are 'hostages,' despite what these ThunderClan cats lead us to believe. I'm a RiverClan apprentice! Who are you all really?"

"I'm a loner!"

"Uh, I was once part of a group called The Journeying."

"I'm a proud housecat." That was Mack's delighted mew.

"If we put our heads together, we will find a solution. We will escape." Pebblepaw forced confidence into her voice as Dewykit looked up, awestruck. "We will use our differences to pull ourselves together, and escape."

"So, every cat understands the plan, right?" Pebblepaw walked around, nudging the scared cats comfortingly.

The cats were waiting for the sun to set before going in full action mode. There would be less Fierce-Protectors in the middle of the night, and they would be tired. They had spent half the day arguing and adding to the plan until every cat was satisfied. Pebblepaw liked the plan a lot. No claws, but instead smarts. If it worked, the 'hostages' would be hostages no more.

"Yep. Sounds great, Pebblestar!" Pebblepaw was taken out of her doze by a bright, young voice. She blinked at Dewykit. The tom had been laying beside his unconscious littermate the whole day, being surprisingly still and compassionate for a boisterous kit so young.

"There's no leader," Pebblepaw meowed. "We all just have our strengths and weaknesses." Her tail flicked along the ground uneasily. *I'm really overstepping here, little kit. I just want it to be over. I'm not wise and powerful, I'm just an apprentice who's alive only because of luck.*

Pebblepaw watched from a shadowy corner of the den as two young cats about her age chatted together like baby starlings. One was a ragged rogue, the other a kittypet.

"So the kittypets use their... kindness?" the rogue muttered. "I ain't sure how that works."

The kittypet nudged the rogue's shoulder, purring warmly. "I'll show you how later on, Foxglove! It'll be great just to be free, won't it? To be *alive.*"

Pebblepaw was pulled away from listening by a scrabbling sound on the wood of the hostage's den. Lavenderkit looked up at her with eyes bright from fever. "Thank you," she rasped solemnly. As Pebblepaw opened her jaws to protest that it wasn't really her that should be thanked, the little kit nudged her and mewed. "*Thank you,* for getting this all in motion."

Pebblepaw dipped her head to the kit in thanks. It was almost time. Almost time to live, or to die. Pebblepaw padded over to the two-

leg den window and let out a heavy sigh. There were only three ThunderClan warriors on duty.

Min padded up to her, and touched Pebblepaw's shoulder with her tail. The two cats watched the awe-inducing streaks of red, orange and yellow blaze across the sky, not saying a word to each other.

Eventually, Min meowed. "I am ever so amazed by the resilience of this world."

"Yeah?"

"I mean look, Peb, everyday the sun dies and yet it is able to wake again, time after time. Just like you." Min turned away, then added, "the cats are in position; the loners get out as soon as the last of the sun dies."

Pebblepaw turned and dipped her head to Min as the she-cat padded away, "thank you," she whispered softly.

Min flicked her tail in acquiescence and let out a small half-hearted grin. Pebblepaw stared out of the two-leg den at the sunset for one more moment before turning away. She heard the scuffling of paws; the plan was in motion. No cat would speak from now on.

The four kittypets were sitting eagerly at the front. They were going to play mousebrained and act silly and goofy to allow the other cats to sneak by. Pebblepaw was astonished by the bravery of Mack and Spike when they had co-suggested this plan; it was the most dangerous part.

The eight loners were in a line, tail-to-tail; intimidating rogues were on the sides of the loners, fur bristling and fluffed up. If their escape was noticed, the loners would scram in different directions, and the vengeful rogues would stay to fight.

Pebblepaw nodded to the cats as she picked up Dewykit's scruff. He knew to be silent. Min picked up the limp Lavenderkit. Pebblepaw flicked her tail, and the kittypets jumped out the window.

Every cat listened from inside the two-leg den as the ThunderClan Fierce-Protectors let out hisses and snarls, more irritated than

angry. Pebblepaw felt uneasy. *If this plan doesn't work, we'll be in even worse shape than before...*

Then she heard Mack's voice. "Hey, no need to get all angsty, friends. Me and my pals just wanted to show you our super epic stunt trick! Sit back, and..."

Pebblepaw was convinced that some of the cars behind her were rolling her eyes. Mack had said at the meeting that he was 'really, really great at distracting upset cats from their problems.' Every cat had rolled their eyes then and there, but had agreed anyway.

Now, she heard Spike's mew. "He'll need a large spruce tree to show you the trick. One *far* away from here, right, Mack?"

Pebblepaw swished her tail as most of the cats moved off with the kittypets. Only one ThunderClan warrior remained; the cats would wait until she was distracted... *now!*

Pebblepaw flicked her ears, to signal that the loners should start moving out. The first, a pale grey tabby slunk out, and then the rest streamed behind, pushing and jostling to get in the lead. Pebblepaw held fast to the little kit in her jaws as a muscular rogue leaped out.

She watched as Min jumped over the fence with Lavenderkit. It was her time to escape now, but she wanted to make sure all the cats in her care got out safely. She turned and watched the last flicking tail of a loner exit the window, when she saw Salamander sitting at the back of the two-leg den, eyes flashing. Her eyes were wet and she opened her jaws as though to let out a mournful yowl, and Pebblepaw bundled into her.

"What are you doing?" Pebblepaw hissed, trying to pin Salamander down.

"You wondered why I was the first hostage," Salamander hissed. "Well, it's because I'm a ThunderClan cat. And Mightystar's kin s-"

Pebblepaw looked at her. "So you want to sabotage our escape?" She didn't really know this cat, and it saddened her to see the she-cat so upset.

Salamander shrugged angrily. "No. Just leave me alone to rot here. That's what I want."

Pebblepaw blinked in confusion. She didn't have time for this. Quick as a snake, she gripped Dewykit in her jaws and raced out.

Chaos met her. ThunderClan warriors were pelting up the slope, crying, "Hosatges! Come back or perish. There is *no* escape."

Pebblepaw kept on running, not wanting to see if any of her allies were getting recaptured. She raced along the trees toward WindClan territory, until her jaws were gasping with exertion. She needed a rest. "Don't stop!" Dewykit squealed. "Some cat is stalking us!"

Pebblepaw narrowly managed to dodge a massive calico, and kept on running. If not for Dewykit's supreme sense of smell, the two cats could have been caught. She picked up her pace, pushing her muscles to the extreme to get Dewykit out of harm's way. *Is this how Nightpaw felt when he saved me? Oh StarClan, I don't think I'm cut out for heroics.*

Pebblepaw was confident that her paws were going to fall off, when suddenly she scented the sharp tang of moor and field. She had crossed into WindClan territory.

Almost instantly, Pebblepaw was swept off her paws by a scrawny dark ginger tom barreling into her. "ThunderClan, get off our land!" she heard.

"Wait, don't! She's a friend!" Pebblepaw landed with a thump just as she heard Min's screech of warning.

The WindClan tom stared over her, eyes narrowed, until he saw the kit clasped tightly in her jaws. Then, he instantly leaped off and dipped his head in apology. When he looked up again, he meowed, "Dewkit!?"

Pebblepaw got to her paws and took a brief moment to take a look at the scene around her. Min and a few loners were talking with three WindClan cats. Lavenderkit was being hurried back towards

WindClan camp by a fourth.

"This kit is WindClan, right?" Pebblepaw heard the anxious squeak in her voice.

"This is my kit, Dewkit." The WindClan warrior was practically leaping up and down now, with the same infectious excitement as his son.

Dewkit got to his paws, happiness glimmering in his eyes. "You got one thing wrong, though," the tiny kit piped up. "I'm *Dewy*kit."

Pebblepaw watched the sunrise, sitting beside Min. The escape had gone well, and now the cats had gathered just outside two-leg place to count and make sure everyone had escaped. As it turned out, everyone had returned except for two easily frightened loners who had been spotted running through two-leg place. All the cats were illuminated by a rosy glow as the sun rose in the horizon.

"It worked," a young raggedy rogue let out a deep breath as she leaned against a kittypet. "We're alive, Rainbow!"

"And, really, it's all thanks to Pebblepaw. You're like a leader," Rainbow agreed brightly, her eyes happy.

Pebblepaw felt uneasy about the praise of the other cats. It was bad enough that the young cats thanked her, but when cranky old Bark had called her a 'heroic leader,' Pebblepaw had felt even more uneasy.

"We all really did it together," Pebblepaw mewed to the circle of cats.

Bark twitched his ears in acquiescence of Pebblepaw's words. "But... what now?" he mewed. "Honest, I don't feel certain about living in a place where these Thundercats reign supreme."

Min stared at Pebblepaw before mewing. "They want to drive all the other clans out, starting with RiverClan. We have to stand up and fight for our very way of being, Peb."

Pebblepaw had walked many different paths in her life. That of a

coward, a victim, an apprentice, a hostage, and a leader. She had tried sitting around and waiting for others to solve the problems. She hadn't tried herself, because she was afraid of fighting back, but now everything seemed crystal clear...

"You're right," Pebblepaw mewed. "It's time to stop a war."

Chapter 20

Chapter 20

"Darkthunder! Darkthunder! Yay, Darkthunder!"

Darkpaw stared blankly, impassively ahead as Mightystar touched her forehead, thus ending the warrior ceremony. She was sitting on the high ledge as the cats below acclaimed her by her new name. A name she didn't like, or want to accept. *It's official! I'm now a traitor. Hooray me.*

As Darkpaw, now Darkthunder, stood, watching the crows of warriors gradually disbursing, she saw Thornpaw and Batpaw. The two littermates were glowering up at her, a fire in their eyes. Darkthunder still didn't know if she fully trusted them. The three cats had been friends once, brought together against Pebblepaw, but now, everything was different.

Mightystar gave her a cut nod. "Welcome, new Swift-Runner. Enjoy your promotion day."

With that, the clan leader turned back to her den, and Darkthunder leaped off the highledge. A few warriors came to greet her, but most looked at her distrustfully. *I don't trust any of you either.*

Boulderpaw grinned one of his massive goofy grins. "So epic! I wish I was a warrior, but, well, I'm not quite as cool and awesome as you are yet."

He nudged her shoulder as Darkthunder rolled her eyes and padded away. When she was younger, Darkthunder thought that all ThunderClan cats were carrionplace stinking pieces of mousedung, but now she thought differently, at least for a few of them. *Smokeblaze, Mossypaws, and Boulderpaw are actually pretty good cats.*

Maybe that was just because she was a naughty cat too now; she wasn't sure. Darkthunder pushed her way past the milling group of

cats to reach her two Tinypelts, Batpaw and Thornpaw. For the past quarter moon, she had tried talking to them, but they only spoke in sharp retorts of quick snaps of words. All she knew was that things in RiverClan were getting worse, and cats were angry and afraid.

"You know, there are cats who think that things of the highest value come from power and dominance," Thornpaw meowed, to seemingly no cat in particular. "There are others who say that the richest thing in life is having lots of freshkill. And there are those who find happiness in their clan and kin."

Darkthunder padded over to the two cats and flicked her tail. "Come with me." She had a lot she wanted to say to the two cats, out of the earshot of her clanmates.

Reluctantly, Thornpaw and Batpaw padded after Darkthunder out of camp, eyes narrowed with interest. They had been friends so recently, and now they were almost enemies. *Whatever. They just need to hear me out.*

Throughout the past quarter moon, Darkthunder had been thinking about her actions. It wasn't exactly like a cat changed overnight. She had always loathed Pebblepaw, but as Darkthunder had drifted off to sleep, two questions had hit her. *Would I do it all over again? Try and kill Pebblepaw?* The second was. *If loyalty is bound in trust, and I trust no cat, then who am I supposed to support now? Who am I supposed to care for?*

Darkthunder had unconsciously let anger and spite seap into her because of the cats she surrounded herself with. Firbush, Earthstar, and now Mightystar had all told her to let the fury in, let it define her values. She was the point of living in a world shaped by others, reacting to what they told her she should be. *But, who am I really?* Darkthunder wished she knew. The world was certainly a complicated place.

Darkthunder led Thornpaw and Batpaw to a sheltered clearing. It was just outside ThunderClan territory; she didn't want any cat eavesdropping on their conversation. She flicked her tail, and the three cats sat down beside a clump of bracken.

Batpaw flicked his tail over the ground, ears twitching uneasily. "You want something from us?" he queried. "StarClan, who are you really, Dark*thunder?"*

Darkthunder flicked scowled. She hated that name; it just felt *wrong.* "I thought we could talk..." her voice trailed away.

"Yeah? After everything?" Batpaw muttered. "What is going on?"

Darkthunder almost reeled back at the resentment in Batpaw's eyes. He was usually so calm, so uncaring, wasn't he?

"Well, I think we should talk about everything. You are my... acquaintances, after all."

Batpaw snarled and she growled at him right back.

Thornpaw blinked at her. "I'll take the bite first. Clearly neither of you is willing to let go of your deep loathing. Just live in the present, for a few moments, guys. This isn't about our dislike of Darkthunder's actions, Batpaw, it's about saving RiverClan from being destroyed."

Batpaw dipped his head, eyes shimmering. "StarClan knows I don't know what to do anymore." More resolutely, he added. "Which side are you on, Darkthunder?"

Darkthunder ignored the fact that he called her by her apprentice name. "Neither right now. Both, I guess."

That took the two cats by surprise. "Both?" they mewed.

Darkthunder sat down, staring out at the bewildered faces of Batpaw and Thornpaw. *Both.* She liked the sound of that. There's no easy answer on which side to pick in an upcoming war when you've been in the heart of both sides. Sure, ThunderClan would seem like the enemy to Batpaw and Thornpaw in this situation, but what about Boulderpaw, Smokeblaze and the rest of the ThunderClan cats? They were fighting a war because of *Mightystar.*

A thought struck Darkthunder, which was an odd one for her. *If I had been born in ThunderClan, I would be loyal to them, but is it fair to*

judge a cat based on where they're born? Stop being so analytical, she told herself. Despite that, a small voice in her head still whispered, *who am I?*

"We want to end the war, too," Batpaw agreed. "But ThunderClan has to pay up. They killed some of our warriors so we need to hurt them back."

Darkthunder rolled her eyes. *So he hates me for wanting to hurt Pebblepaw, but is perfectly willing to hurt cats for vengeance, too. I'm being hypocritical, I know.* "Insert Pebblepaw in the place you put ThunderClan, and you will find that our motivations were almost identical."

Thornpaw sighed. "Answer this, Darkthunder, do you still despise Pebblepaw with a burning passion?"

Darkthunder shrugged. "I don't like her, but my dislike turned to an obsession, which turned to violence. She's fine, I guess. I don't really want her dead, if that's what you mean."

Thornpaw flicked her ears. "Which side are you fighting for?"

Darkthunder shrugged. "I guess we'll find out when the war comes. But, maybe I can help you, just to see how it feels. I certainly would enjoy bullying some of those ThunderClan cats."

Thornpaw and Batpaw exchanged a look. Batpaw was shaking his head emphatically, but Thornpaw was nodding to him. "It's time. She deserves to know, *I* will trust her. We don't have any alternate options, regardless. We did grow up together, after all."

Darkthunder nodded, knowing exactly what these cats were trying to say. "Time to stop a war." *Maybe I'll learn who I am, if I fight with these cats I've known my whole life.*

Just then, Darkthunder heard a gasp and a rustling from the nearby bracken bush. *A spy!* Panic shot through her. *I'll just tell them I was lying, trying to gather information.*

Darkthunder leaped, claws outstretched, and landed on the bulky grey heap of fur that was Boulderpaw. She instantly dug her claws

into him, and snarled. *What am I supposed to do? Him or them...*

"Sorry, sorry sorry!" Boulderpaw mewed from underneath Darkthunder. To her surprise, he didn't squirm at all.

"What are you doing?" she hissed.

And then words came out of Darkthunder's mouth that she never would have expected. "I want to help you end the war. Honest, not just because you're cool, but because I don't want to ever have to fight again."

Darkthunder decided not to think too hard about what Boulderpaw was saying. "What do you really want?" she snarled at him.

She was aware of Thornpaw and Batpaw behind her, shuffling their paws uneasily. Boulderpaw meowed, "I don't want to fight anymore, and y'all seem like you have some sort of super epic not-fighting plan. Besides, I'm pretty much done with the way ThunderClan runs things. Maybe a defeat for them would be good."

Thornpaw looked at him, curiosity mixed with irritation in her eyes. "This isn't some traitor-fest, kit. We need cats who want to help stop this war, before others die. We need good cats, who care for the greater good of everyone."

Boulderpaw blinked eagerly, tail twitching excitedly. "Yes! This is so true. I want to help, because I've seen what violence can do. Peace is surely easier and better. I know tons of ThunderClan cats who would agree. Mightystar isn't that kind, after all."

"Understatement of the year," Batpaw sighed.

"Alright," Darkthunder meowed. "We'll help." *I do want to help you, I really do. Maybe after this, everything will slow down, and I'll figure out who I truly am, again.*

"So, who do we talk to first?"

Darkthunder and Boulderpaw had been working with Batpaw and Thornpaw for the past quarter moon. Well, if 'working with' meant they did all the grunt work whilst Batpaw and Thornpaw sat around

giving orders. *I'm not being fair to them, they're doing* something. *Something that I don't know about, though.*

Now, the two cats were making their way into ThunderClan camp, with a plethora of freshkill. The sun was just beginning to set, casting golden rays in the sky, and long shadows on the forest floor. It seemed that the whole camp was still awake, cheerily sharing tongues.

"Whelp. My guess's as good as yours, Darkthunder I mean, don't get me wrong I am a ThunderClan cat, but I'm not exactly the most 'socially aware' type. There's angry cats, eager cats, smart cats and grumpy cats, but trustworthy cats... I dunno."

Darkthunder slumped her shoulders. She should have expected that from Boulderpaw. She was about to bound over to the apprentice's den, when Boulderpaw blocked her path. "You aren't an apprentice no more," he reminded her. "I'll talk to them, you talk to the *warriors.*

Darkthunder let out a small grunt of irritation as Boulderpaw cheerfully padded over to his denmates. Creampaw greeted him with a small mrow of welcome, and Roachpaw reluctantly moved to give him space to sit down. "You did that on purpose," she grumbled under her breath. "Coward."

Darkthunder padded over in the direction of the warriors. It felt as though she was stepping into a whole new world. A massive tom's rounded belly rolled with laughter as he bit arrogantly into a vole, blood smearing the ground. *Forestcruch*, Darkthunder thought, was his name. *Remind me why I thought this was a good idea,* Darkthunder thought inwardly. *Because it's ever so smart to antagonise the big bad guys to save cats that probably want you dead too.*

Darkthunder shook off her angst. She thought of Nightpaw. *Yes.* She was doing this for him. Ever since Darkthunder's desire to kill Pebblepaw had gone to the extreme, she had tried not to really think about her brother. She knew that he would be upset at her for wanting to kill Pebblepaw. She knew that he was probably being disappointed and angry somewhere in StarClan right now. If she did this, maybe she could make him happy.

"Tabbywillow! Shortleap! Quickrun! Get over here!"

Darkthunder stiffened as a pale grey she-cat led out a distressed cry. She instant padded over, curiosity dragging her paws forward. Suddenly, three shapes darted past Darkthunder and took the distressed she-cat. "*Where* in StarClan's name is my and Forestcrunch's daily grooming and vole?" The grey she-cat snarled irritably.

"Sorry. Oof. Uh, we forget sometimes, my bad?" A large white tom mewed to the she-cat's snarl.

"Or maybe we don't want to be your Tinypelts," a small dark brown and white tabby she-cat growled under her breath.

Tinypelts! So that was what this was all about. When Darkthunder had come to ThunderClan, she had suspected that Tinypelts and hostages were the same rank. Apparently, as she had later learned, they were not. Where hostages were underfed and mangy; treated like prisoners, Tinypelts were essentially reject warriors who hadn't successfully stood up against Mightystar's standards. They spent their days doing what in RiverClan would be considered mundane apprentice tasks, while still being 'free' cats. *That tabby she-cat sounds unhappy, I could exploit that.*

"What was that, Shortleap?" the grey she-cat meowed sharply. "I could have sworn I just heard you say you don't want to be a Tinypelt. Maybe a hostage would be a better fit for your set of skills."

"Nah, nope. Everything's great! I think you misunderstooded, Icefall," the white tom meowed, trying desperately to clean over the ruffled pelts.

"Hey." Darkthunder padded over and butted into the conversation.

The grey she-cat glowered at her, and Darkthunder blinked back serenely. "Oh, you're that new warrior," she grunted crossly. "What do you want?"

Darkthunder flicked her tail. "I'd punish these Tinypelts for you.

They'll be much more submissive and respectful after I... talk to them."

"And why should I trust you?"

Darkthunder sighed inwardly as all of the cats turned to glare at her. She winced. There seemed to be a mass of other ThunderClan warriors that looked up. That one word, *trust.* What did it truly mean? Why would any cat *trust?* She flicked her ears and shrugged. "I just feel like flexing my claws a little bit."

That wasn't a lie. But it's you. Icefall who I want to claw. Arrogant, smug furball! One ThunderClan warrior, Forestcrunch, looked up idly, amusement glittering in his eyes. "Flex your claws, eh?"

"You should trust me," Darkthunder turned back to Icefall, spite glittering in her green eyes. "Mightystar does. Do you doubt the great wisdom of our heroic and fearless leader?"

Icefall shook her head and let out a small purr. "Come with me, every cat who wants to! Come to Slash Rock at midnight. Come and see if we can truly *trust* our new Swift-Runner."

ThunderClan certainly had a weird way of doing things. Darkthunder didn't entirely know what was going on, but she had a feeling that this was a way to gain possible allies. *Have I just picked a fight with a gang leader? I guess I'll find out.*

Darkthunder flicked her tail, looking for the three Tinypelts. They were all huddled away, a little distance from the crowd. As she padded away, she muttered under her breath. "Trust me. Go to the river by two-leg place just outside ThunderClan territory." *Interesting spot, but that's where Thornpaw said to bring them. "*Gather all your cats. We're ending Mightystar's reign."

Two of the Tinypelts looked up, hope flashing in their eyes. The other let out a grunt. The plan was in place. Within the next quarter to half moon, there would be war. RiverClan, ThunderClan, and the peacekeepers. *It's time to save the world... StarClan that sounded sappy.*

Darkthunder padded toward the Slash Rock, Boulderpaw in tow. He had looked extremely alarmed at the prospect of Darkthunder meeting Icefall alone, and had even told her that Icefall was notorious for cats disappearing at night, never to return again. Especially Tinypelts and traitor cats, apparently.

Boulderpaw kept flicking his tail from side to side in anxiety. Darkthunder had told him not to say a word, in case this was some sort of ambush, but Boulderpaw was clearly struggling to keep all his thoughts inside. The clearing with the Slash Rock was just ten foxlengths away. Darkthunder indicated with her tail for Boulderpaw to hang back. Clearly he didn't care to follow her orders, though, because the massive light grey tom bounded brightly into the clearing.

Suddenly, four shapes leaped at him, all at the same time, with synchronised practice and ease. Darkthunder suppressed a gasp as she watched Boulderpaw buckle beneath the writhing mass of gleaming tooth and claw. Brown, ginger, white, grey and peach pelt colours all glinted in the moonlight. Darkthunder hesitated beneath the push she was hiding behind, bunching her muscles.

This is it, right? Time to show my loyalty to this friendly apprentice. Time to prove that I'm a good cat? I don't care what other cats think of me. All that matters is that Boulderpaw is rescued. Darkthunder sprang from the bushes, feet pounding the earth as she rounded on the cats.

"Back off!" she snarled at them furiously.

The four furry faces turned to look at her. One looked irritated, one looked uneasy, and two were expressionless.

It was the uneasy-faced cat that spoke next. "We got the wrong one? StarClan give me strength."

One of the cats jumped off of Boulderpaw in a graceful leap. Darkthunder stared in horror at Boulderpaw's fur and blood beneath his claws. *They wanted that to be me?!* Without thinking, Darkthunder barreled into the other cats, pushing them off with the ease of a desperate and furious cat. Boulderpaw stood beneath her

now, blood gushing out of a shoulder wound. He was motionless. As motionless as Nightpaw's body.

"You murderers! How could you kill him?" Darkthunder snarled furiously, wedging herself between Boulderpaw and the four cats, who now stood in a semi-circle around her. Except... two more cats were melting out of the shadows behind her.

No cat spoke. Darkthunder's gaze darted around, and for the first time she felt unease prick her pelt. She was surrounded by a half dozen cats, in a circle around her and Boulderpaw. What surprised her, though, was the fact that these cats didn't smell like just ThunderClan. They weren't stinky rogues either. They were warrior cats from all the different clans. The circle grew smaller and smaller as the half dozen or so cats padded toward her. Slinking, as though they were looking at a juicy morsel of prey. That was when one cat padded out of the tightening circle, and Darkthunder's jaw dropped in horror.

"He's not. Not dead yet. Hello Dark*thunder*, it's been a long time, hasn't it? I'm sure you remember me, right?" The voice was smooth, and dripping with malice that chilled Darkthunder to the bone.

The tom padded closer, advancing on her, while the rest of the cats stayed back. Dark brown fur glinted coldly in the moonlight, and amber eyes pierced Darkthunder right into her heart. She couldn't back away; her muscles had stopped working. The tom padded closer, and closer.

"Firbush," Darkthunder choked out.

Darkthunder stared in mesmerised horror as Firbush padded toward her. She hadn't seen him in what felt like entire seasons. All the other cats seemed to fall away, mere splotches in the background as she stared at the tom that had once been her mentor.

Firbush curled his lip in disgust. "I've said it once, and I'll say it again, kit. You really always seem to find yourself in a dandy mess."

His tail twitched slightly as he stared at Darkthunder, a glint in his amber eyes. "So, you're a traitor?" Darkthunder sneered. "I should

have expected that. That cat you were talking to when I tracked your trail way back when was Icefall, wasn't it?"

Firbush twitched his ears, no longer listening to Darkthunder. Darkthunder noted that he must be scenting the breeze. "ThunderClan patrol," he murmured.

Firbush lashed his tail once, and then cats were upon her, like a massive tidal wave. She was pinned down by what felt like an entire army of warriors. Darkthunder bit and scratched, desperately trying to pull herself free, but there was no way out. She felt leaves cover her face, cover her eyes, until she only saw blackness. Darkthunder tried to let out a furious wail, but fur brushed across her muzzle, making her choke. She found herself suffocating on the fur, panic rising in her chest. *StarClan is this the end? After everything, does my trail end here?*

Chapter 21

Chapter 21

Pebblepaw sat on the bank beside a small bubbling stream, her tail half submerged in the water. She was slumped down, every part of her, even her whiskers, drooping in exhaustion and unease. All of this, everything that was going on was way out of her comfort zone. If she thought the world had changed too much right after Nightpaw's death, the world must be entirely spinning out of control now. *Except, there are things we can still control, right?*

The stars glittered darkly overhead, casting long shadows over the forest as Pebblepaw sat, staring blankly ahead. *A quarter moon, and StarClan, what are we even trying to do here?*

Every day had flown by, exactly like the last, as the freed cats worked to stay alive; catching small morsels of prey, and gross two-leg food. As the days had passed by, the cats had grown more and more uneasy. There was no plan, no heroic leader. There was only a group of roughly treated cats, trying to survive together.

Pebblepaw's tail dropped even further into the water. *But what did I expect? Every cat here is so* different, *and it's so hard to work together.* Pebblepaw sat up suddenly, her ears twitching with apprehension as she scented a ThunderClan scent,

"Heya."

Pebblepaw instantly bolted upright. She'd been spotted. A shrill of fear rippled through her body, as she imagined what might happen next; ThunderClan warriors interrogating her, ripping her to shreds, or taking her hostage again. Instinctively, Pebblepaw unsheathed her claws and bared her teeth, bunching her muscles in anticipation of the find that would soon ensue.

"Don't get all hissy at me; I totally like helped you, remember?" Brown and ginger fur flashed in the corner of Pebblepaw's vision as

Mossypaws of all cats stepped out of the bushes, with a rueful smile on her face

"Mossypaws!?" Pebblepaw exclaimed. Unease and anticipation rushed through her pelt. "What do you want? Why are you here?"

Mossypaws didn't snarl, didn't leap at her. Instead, the ThunderClan she-cat sat down. "Herbs. Also, pal, you're a mess."

When Pebblepaw didn't speak, Mossypaws went on. "I live here and gather herbs here," she offered. "So I've seen you and your buddies moping around tons. You look like you're trying and failing to be some wise old leader cat. It looks pretty rough, for lack of a better word."

Pebblepaw honestly had no clue what to say. She couldn't deny that Mossypaws was making some sense, and yet she didn't really want to show any vulnerability before this cat. "You've been stalking us," she meowed tiredly. "Have any of your friends been as well?"

Mossypaws let out what sounded like the grunt of a horse. Pebblepaw recognised it as laughter. Mossypaws almost started rolling on the ground with amusement at Pebblepaw's words. "Nope. No patrols venture this far. All cats are focussed on the RiverClam border right now." she meowed straightforwardly. Then added, "just good o'l Mossypaws doing her daily stalking."

Pebblepaw was beginning to sink to the ground now in relief, but Mossypaws suddenly bounded over the little stream and lay down beside Pebblepaw. "You need some help, Pebs," she meowed simply. "Even physically half dead in the Medicine Den, you had your spunk, now you seem mentally half dead."

Pebblepaw felt tears brimming in her eyes, but she tried to push them away. *What does this ThunderClan apprentice know?* "It's been... tiring, to say the least," she mewed evasively.

Mossypaws rolled her eyes. "Yeah. I figured," she grunted. "Look, I'll tell ya something to maybe cheer ya up."

Pebblepaw shifted her paw uneasily, and stood up straighter. She

had to be brave for now. There was no time to show vulnerability. "Okay?" she said in a sceptical tone.

"My name ends in 'paws,'" Mossypaws began. "This is 'cause at my apprentice ceremony I openly criticised Mightystar. Called her a mouse-dropper or something. The actual words ain't important."

"A bad move," Pebblepaw butted in, feeling slightly bewildered.

"Yep. Mighty took me to her den. Lashed out at me. Threatened me," Mossypaws shrugged her shoulders. "When I didn't react too much, she told me I was 'destined' to be a Medicine Cat. Not so great that she thinks so poorly of the healers of the clans that that's a punishment; it seems to be a prejudice many cats have, I've noticed. Anyways, long story short she also said my name would always be 'paws,' because of how apprentice-like I am."

Pebblepaw shifted her paws, "why do you tell me this?" She murmured.

Mossypaws shrugged. "You have to fight for what you believe in, even if you get hurt. It will always help you in the long run."

Pebblepaw sat up straighter. *She's right. By being true to myself, I can surely get this done.*

Just as Pebblepaw was about to speak to Mossypaws, there was a flurry of movement at the edges of her attention. She heard the faint sound of rustling leaves. Suddenly, cats dived out of the trees surrounding her and the ThunderClan cat. It would have been awe-inducing, if not for the terror that shrilled through Pebblepaw as she watched a fresh wave of enemies pour down, like water dropplets. Mossypaws stood there in shock, not even managing out a yowl, before she was buried deep beneath a massive writhing body of cats. *Never again!*

Before the two shapes in Pebblepaw's peripheral vision could land on her, she was splashing across the stream. She flailed her paws, sending cascades of water, which would hopefully drive the attackers back. Water splashed all around her, and Pebblepaw forced her paws to move faster, pull harder, driving her closer and

closer to the far bank.

Pebblepaw dug her claws hard into the soft mud, propelling herself up and out of the water. Leaves fluttered around her, from the trees where the cats had descended from the treetops as Pebblepaw pounded towards Mossypaws. It would only be a few more tail lengths before she reached the group of cats that had Mossypaws pinned down. Pebblepaw unsheathed her claws, and in a massive leap that exerted all of her muscles, she leaped on top of the pile of cats.

Pebblepaw didn't claw at the exposed skin and faces of her snarling enemies. She didn't go berserk. Instead, Pebblepaw's gaze darted around, and within seconds she had found a weak spot. She pushed a ginger tom, who lost his balance easily, and Pebblepaw pushed her way down, to where Mossypaws lay at the bottom.

When she was able to get a good look at Mossy Paws, she saw a long scratch on the side of her face. Pebblepaw's eyes locked with Mossypaws' and she saw fear sparking in their depths. Oddly, Pebblepaw didn't feel fear anymore. She had felt so much fear, so much anxiety in her life, and it hadn't ever helped her out. Pebblepaw felt determination and strength pouring into her limbs. *I can do this. I can help to save a cat.*

She couldn't out-power these cats. There was no point in going claw-to-claw. Pebblepaw pushed her way out of the cats and let out a commanding yowl. "Stop fighting! It's not her you want!"

All of the cats stopped fighting and turned to stare, wide-eyed at Pebblepaw. Mossypaws managed to scramble out of the cats, her eyes gleaming with appreciation. Pebblepaw continued, "w-who are you?" her voice came out like that of a fearful kit. Resolutely, Pebblepaw tried again. "I have no clue who you are. I have no real need to know, because all that I see is a group of cats using their claws. A danger to me and my... friend."

StarClan, where am I going with this, Pebblepaw thought desperately. "You use your claws and parachute yourself from trees, as if that is the only way to greet others. But, StarClan gave us claws that unsheath, and ears that never stop listening for a reason. Why do

you come here, in search of hurting others?"

That was when Pebblepaw took a moment to survey the cats, and her jaws opened in shock. Some of these cats she knew! All of the cats that surrounded her were clan warriors, but they were all young; new warriors, and apprentices.

"Pebblepaw?! You're alive?" Pebblepaw turned her gaze just in time to see Carptuft leaping toward her.

She reeled back in shock at the sight of him. He hardly had anything besides fur and bones left on him. He stank of crowfood, and there were so many wounds that lay on him like red leaves in leaf-fall. He stared at her, eyes wide with shock, but also hope. Pebblepaw, on wobbly legs, bent forward and touched noses with him.

For that short moment, Pebblepaw felt like she was at home again, just another RiverClan apprentice. Everything had been so much easier then. When Pebblepaw stepped back, Carptuft mewed, "why did you stay away, i-if you were alive? Are the other two alive as well? Is the traitor dead?"

Pebblepaw didn't entirely have an answer, but what she knew was that there was enough to do here, and she felt uneasy about returning to her old home, without doing more to help. Instead of replying, Pebblepaw turned back to the cats that had attacked her. "What do you want?" she mewed. "Are you ThunderClan spies, or do you want to end the war?"

"We're no ThunderClan squirrel-chasers!" A cat responded jubilantly.

"Yeah. I want to watch all of ThunderClan die until they're nothing more than a story told by the Elders to frighten naughty kittens!"

"Pain to ThunderClan! End to ThunderClan! Death to ThunderClan!"

Pebblepaw blinked as the cats cheered out for violence and destruction. *Darkpaw thought violence was the answer, and I did too, for a while, when I thought of ThunderClan.* Pebblepaw noted that

Mossypaws, now hiding in the bushes, was wincing with each remark, as though a cat was repeatedly clawing at her face. *It's not that easy, though. That's why we're stuck; how do you stop a war without winning it by eliminating the enemy?*

Pebblepaw was caught off guard when Carptuft nudged her in the shoulder. "It's great, isn't it?" he purred. "You must have allies here," he nodded to a few former hostage-den cats who were bounding over the stream, curiosity and fear in their eyes. "With more cats, we can finally end ThunderClan!"

End ThunderClan? Pebblepaw thought that that sounded a bit rash. Pebblepaw could only imagine that Darkpaw had similar thoughts when she'd thought of her. *I didn't deserve to die, right?*

She stared out at all the cats, their eyes bright and eager. There were probably just over a half a dozen of them; young cats, reckless cats. Although, with another dozen from the former hostage-den cats and the whole of RiverClan, they would be formidable rivals against ThunderClan. Pebblepaw's heart lifted up for just a second, and then dropped. *That's not what I want, though. There are so many innocent, and misguided ThunderClan cats.* She imagined cats like Mossypaws, laying bloody and broken on the battlefield and shook her head. *It would be too costly for everything. Mass murder and genocide is what they're suggesting, even if they cover it up with words like 'eliminate,' or 'end.' You don't end killing with even more killing.*

Pebblepaw blinked at Carptuft and the cats surrounding him. They were all young and free, starved and bullied. She believed she'd made many mistakes in her life, and she wasn't about to make one more. She fluffed up her pelt, and tried to make her voice sound bright, "Let me talk to my friends, okay? Can we all gather in, say, two nights from tonight?"

By friends, Pebblepaw meant all the hostages and the other apprentices. Cats who knew and understood what was going to happen. Cats who could help her figure out what was right. As Pebblepaw padded toward the river and shadows, one thing was for certain now. She had allies. She just needed the right plan, and she needed it soon, before the time ran out.

Chapter 22

Chapter 22

Darkthunder stared out blearily, her eyes adjusting to the gloom. *Where am I?* She tried to remember what she had been doing last night, but everything was oddly fuzzy. She dug her claws into the ground, feeling soft dirt underpaw. Darkthunder tried to stretch her muscles, but little bolts of agony flared through her, and she went limp.

Once Darkthunders eyes had finally adjusted to the darkness, she noted that there was bark surrounding her on all sides. *A hollowed out tree, then.* That was when memories of the previous night's events came flowing back into her mind. It was like a massive tidal wave, sweeping her away. Boulderpaw and her being attacked. *Mysterious cats. Firbush.*

As Darkthunder stretched her muscles in the small, damp, dark den, she noticed that Boulderpaw was leaning against her, letting out soft snores. He groaned, and Darkthunder noticed a long gash trailing along his side, and a few tufts of fur missing. She felt sparks of anger sear through her pelt. This was all Firbush's fault. He was going to pay for this.

Darkthunder traced her way around the hollow enclosure, trying not to think about why she had been put there. The only bit of light came from a tunnel, which was likely the sole escape route. Darkthunder wasn't a mousebrain, though, she knew that the entrance was probably guarded. *After all, they obviously exerted lots of energy to get us here.*

Darkthunder whirled around when she saw a scuffling of paws behind her. She bounded over to Boulderpaw as he opened his jaws in a massive, pained yawn.

"Ok, so what is going on?" he mewed blearily, blinking his eyes several times.

Darkthunder didn't even manage to get a word in before the grey tom continued on, in an excessively loud voice. "There were these cats that attacked us, right? Or was that my ultra big imagination? Cats fight so much nowadays it's practically all I dream about."

Boulderpaw got to his paws, turned in a circle, and prodded his side wound. He winced as he spoke, a tiny bit of blood trickling out of the injury. "Nope. Not a dream, Darkthunder. Just in case you were wondering, too. Interesting place, though. I've never seen a hollowed out tree before!"

Before the tom could go on yowling anymore, Darkthunder barreled into him. "Be quiet, mousebrain," she hissed sharply in his ear. "They're probably listening to everything we say."

Darkthunder knew she had probably spoken too harshly to the young cat, especially since he was wounded and had gone through the same things she had. Boulderpaw didn't seem chastened, though. Instead he said brightly, "I ain't got anything to hide!" and went silent.

Darkthunder rolled her eyes, as Boulderpaw sat down and began to meticulously wash the dirt out of his paw pads. She wondered how long the two prisoners would have to wait before a cat came in to talk to them. *They can't be trying to starve us, surely? After all there's an exit.* One thing was for certain though, as soon as she saw Firbush's smug expression, she was going to claw it right off his face.

"Hello."

Darkthunder practically jumped out of her fur at the monotone voice that spoke to her. She whirled around, just in time to see Icefall, Firbush, and another burly white cat she didn't recognize pad up through the tunnel and into the hollow.

Darkthunder bared her teeth in the beginnings of a snarl, and began bunching her muscles, when Icefall spoke sharply to Firbush. "Is she always like this? StarClan, why didn't you get her dealt with sooner?"

Firbush rolled his eyes, but it was the white cat that spoke. "*That* would have been mousebrained," he muttered, flexing his claws. "She was his apprentice for StarClan's sake."

Suddenly there was a flash of grey fur at the corner of Darkthunder's vision, and Boulderpaw was barreling his way into the three cats. Darkpaw stared at him in bewilderment, as Boulderpaw somehow managed to flip Firbush off his paws.

"Darkthunder! Run, now!" he yowled.

Darkthunder sprinted to the hole in the den, but then stopped. She turned back and stared at Boulderpaw as he fought the three intimidating older cats, as though he didn't have a fear in the world. His eyes rounded imploringly as he saw her hesitate.

The world seemed to slow down before Darkthunder's eyes as she looked at Boulderpaw fighting. She had never thought that any cat would risk their own life to save hers. She had never before seen the trust and respect that gleamed in Boulderpaw's eyes as he dodged and took blow after blow from the older cats.

She scarcely even knew this tom, had treated him like mouse-dung, and insulted him. And yet, here he was risking his life for her. Darkthunder knew in that moment the piece of the puzzle that had been missing in her heart all these years. *Loyalty.*

Without even another second's hesitation, she leaped, not at Firbush, who Boulderpaw was dealing with, but at Icefall, and dug her claws deep into the she-cat's sides. Darkthunder rolled and feigned, digging her claws deeper and deeper into Icefall. The she-cat let out a screech of pain, and fell back, blood pooling around her. "I'm getting back-ups," she hissed.

Darkthunder tried to keep a grip on Icefall, but she kicked hard, and Darkthunder fell to the back of the den. Darkthunder noted that Firbush was standing over the unconscious Boulderpaw, his claws raised to strike. The other cat was nowhere to be seen; Boulderpaw had probably driven them off as well.

Darkthunder could run now, before Icefall came back with extra

fighters. She could be free running. She could abandon the clans all together now, but she didn't. In fact, such thoughts never even crossed her mind, as Darkthunder leaped and barreled into Firbush.

He was weakened from his fight with Boulderpaw, but still in good shape. As Darkthunder leaped at him, he dodged, and landed on top of her, pinning her to the ground. Darkthunder struggled, kicking and biting, but Firbush held fast.

He threw her up, and Darkthunder landed with a painful thud at the back of the den. Darkthunder stared up at Firbush, glowering and spitting defiance. He dug her claws deep into her side, and Darkthunder let out a yowl. "I'll stop if you do," she snarled.

Rolling his eyes, Firbush padded over to the sole exit to the den. He then sat back and proceeded to lick a forepaw. Once Darkthunder's world had stopped spiralling, she padded over to Boulderpaw, and nudged him in the ribs.

He didn't move at first, but then turned to look at Darkthunder, eyes clouded. He was thin, and blood still trickled from his many scratches. "Did I fight well?" he asked, eyes round with hope.

Before Darkthunder could respond, he had passed out again, laying still, not even letting out moans of pain.

Darkthunder glowered at Firbush through the gloom. *He knows I won't leave Boulderpaw,* she thought irritably. *He knows I know what will happen if I flee.* Darkthunder forced any feelings of fear back and stared back at Firbush defiantly. She got to her paws, and fluffed up her pelt.

"So, you're evil?" Darkthunder snapped to the dark brown tom. "I should have expected."

Firbush looked up at her, annoyance sparking in his eyes. "I have to respect your strength of character," he grunted out at last, then added. "No cat is 'evil,' there are just some cats smart enough to know that claws have to be shown now and again."

The tom was about to turn back to licking his injuries when

Darkthunder spoke up again. "You make no sense," she muttered. "I mean, what sort of cat are you? You're hyper-loyal to Trouty, a ThunderClan lover, and you clearly want me dead as well, even though you never killed me before..."

Firbush's eyes blazed with such fury, that Darkthunder had to dig her claws into the ground to stop from wincing. "I am a *loyal* RiverClan warrior," he snapped. "The mess with Icefall should have been over seasons ago. But of course, that useless kit has to become clan leader, and try to destroy my clan. You made me look bad before Troutstar, so of course you have to go."

Darkthunder stared at Firbush, trying to piece together everything that he was saying. She wished that Thornpaw or Batpaw could be with her. Those two could probably puzzle together the mess that is Firbush. *He has an alliance with Icefall... He called Mightystar a 'useless kit,' maybe because she's so small, unless...*

"Hold on, why do you want me dead?" Darkthunder mewed. "I was your apprentice."

Firbush glowered at her. "And now you're a warrior. I don't give a fox-dunged mouselength about that. I have enough to do without you tramping around, killing all of Troutstar's pets."

He's mad! Darkthunder didn't understand what Firbush was meowing about, but he clearly wasn't doing well. Firbush buried his paws in his muzzle and groaned. "You'll be gone soon anyway, so I'll tell you," he muttered under his breath. "Icefall and I did some... questionable things together. We really hit it off as 'paws; mischief makers and loners at heart. I cared for no cat. I was always so angry. All the other apprentices despised me, and I despised them, but she saw me for who I really was."

Darkthunder knew where this was going, and she tried not to groan. *Great. A romance story. Firbush has a secret forbidden lover.* Yet, that wasn't what scared her the most about the story; it was instead the parallels between her and Firbush. She had had no cats who cared about her, she had always had anger-management issues.

Firbush continued, "so we... had fun together, talking about our

annoying mousebrained clanmates, and how we wanted to be dominant and clan leaders. It escalated from there; we only cared about each other, no cat else. Then, we started to get frustrated with each other; we were both so similarly heartless and angry at times. And then the kits came."

Darkthunder let out an involuntary groan, and Firbush stared at her sharply. "Of course, *I* didn't want the quartet of them. So I told Icefall to deal with them. She tossed three of them over to a loner pal she had, and kept the fourth; a sickly one. She knew it was going to die without her, so she saved its rotten life."

Darkthunder glowered at him. *No kit is rotten. Cats get bad as they age, but no cats are born with an evil conscience.* Firbush sighed, "obviously Icefall didn't want to see it die, but she didn't want it either. The kit was bullied and bullied some more. *Tiny*kit, they called her. When I saw that cat at the first gathering, I knew she was mine. She had the same fiery loneliness in her eyes. Tinykit became Tinypa-"

Darkthunder cut him off, "which became Tinypelt, then Mightystar, an evil dictator. Thanks very much Firbush for your ever so helpful contribution to the world."

Firbush angrily shrugged his shoulders, "Okay, I admit I'm in a mess, and it would be really great if you could just disappear, kit."

"Why don't you kill me then?"

Firbush glowered at her, "oh, I will, but first you will tell me everything going on in ThunderClan, because Icefall won't. Then you can die, but I need to *use* you first." Firbush blinked, and Darkthunder saw a hint of something like regret in his eyes, "remember, I'm not evil; the end will be fast, former apprentice, you won't feel a thing."

Darkthunder stared at Firbush, then turned away, feeling that both of them had nothing to say to each other. She bounded back to Boulderpaw, who was stirring.

"He will die when they get back, of course."

Darkthunder whirled around to see Firbush licking a scratch on his forepaw. He didn't look up. "That cat's not useful, and I can't have him lying around. You can still be friends again in StarClan, or the dark forest, or whatever. The reason why he's not going right now, is because you'll put up too much of a fight."

Darkthunder opened her jaws to speak, but Firbush's eyes lit up, "they're here now," he purred.

That was when Darkthunder had exhausted all of her other options. She opened her jaws in a yowl, and screeched, "HELP ME!"

Darkthunder kept on yowling, and Firbush let out a groan of annoyed pain. Boulderpaw looked up at her, his eyes pleading her to stop.

Darkthunder had never let herself be weak enough to ask for help. Not ever, until now. Even when she'd probably needed help, Darkthunder hadn't wanted to show weakness. When Darkpaw finally clamped her jaws shut, there were four cats in the den, and likely two more outside. Darkthunder stood in front of Boulderpaw, and unsheathed her claws, as the four cats advanced on her. She wasn't going down without a fight.

As exhilaration pumped into Darkthunder's muscles, she realised the difference between her and Firbush. *I have cats who care about me, and who I will defend with my life. You only have shallow loyalty and devotion to a leader you don't even believe in.*

Darkthunder was about to spring, when suddenly there was a clamour, and yowling outside. In her moment of distraction, Icefall leaped at her, and slashed at Darkthunder's ears. Darkthunder tried to squirm, but she was trapped. This was personal for Icefall now, Darkthunder realised, as the she-cat's eyes looked down at her with hate. *I hurt you, now you want to hurt me back.* Icefall scratches still oozed blood, and her lips were drawn back in a savage snarl.

Darkthunder tried desperately to squirm, but every jerking motion she made seemed to tire her out more. Icefall was lashing out furiously, clearly not even caring that Firbush wanted her alive. As claw scratch after claw scratch penetrated through Darkthunder's

thick fur, she felt her strength ebbing away.

She looked around for Boulderpaw, wondering if he had escaped. At the corner of her vision, she saw the tom. Boulderpaw was being backed up to a wall, his eyes dark as he stared out at the approaching enemies. There were three cats all smirking at him, eyes glittering with triumph. Darkthunder recognised two of Icefall lackeys from ThunderClan. He was going to be hurt by his own clanmates.

Events like this were what shook Darkthunder to her roots, and made her question her own moral beliefs. Every single cat here believed that they were doing the right thing, believed that they were making the right choices. Except, they were all wrong. Darkthunder had seen loyalty, had been afraid of it, because of things like this. Boulderpaw was going to die because he trusted cats like her too openly. Icefall's lackeys were going to fall out of favour with Mightystar and die because they blindly followed Icefall. Loyalty and trust were two difficult things for Darkthunder to understand.

Maybe I'm just losing consciousness, though. Darkthunder knew for certain what her fate was. All of these cats all had different goals. They all were so self-absorbed in their own fury and self-pity that they missed what was going on around them. The claws ripped harder, reminding Darkthunder of the horrible present that she was in.

Darkthunder was just beginning to see stars speckle her vision, when suddenly there was a flash of pale grey fur, and the weight was lifted off her back. Cats were suddenly racing into the small hollow, until the hollow was full of furious hisses and screeches.

Darkthunder stood in shock at the two cats that had helped her. One wore a kittypet collar, and the other... The other was a young small scarred grey she-cat who Darkthunder instantly recognised.

Once Icefall yowled, "retreat my kit! Retreat my clanmates! And for StarClan's sake don't retreat, Firbush!" It was clear that Pebblepaw's group had won a quick victory.

Darkthunder tried to fight, but when she finally got to her paws, hot pain washed over her, and the world went dark. The last thing that she saw was Pebblepaw, standing over her with an unreadable expression on her face.

"Them RiverClan cats. I don't even want to know how many times her and Pebs have been knocked out in their lives."

Darkthunder blinked open her eyes in the starlight, her wounds hurt, but they didn't send a sharp and piercing pain through her body as she tentatively stretched her muscles. The wounds felt merely like a dull throbbing sensation.

"Yeah, you're unfortunately right, there's a lot of... hurting going on." That was Thornpaw's mew.

As Darkthunder blinked open her eyes once more, she looked at Mossypaws and Thornpaw staring at her, with quizzical expressions on their faces. She looked down at the bright green grass underpaw, and the two-leg place a few dozen fox-lengths away that seemed to stretch eternally on into the distance.

"Wha-" Darkthunder began.

The two she-cats who had been talking suddenly turned to look at her. Thornpaw sniffed a wound on Darkthunder's shoulder where clumps of fur were missing, while Mossypaws looked away into the distant night time horizon.

"Come on," Thornpaw nudged Darkthunder forward with her nose towards a bubbling stream.

Darkthunder was confused, but she let the she-cat guide her a few fox-lengths to a mossy rock with lots of sun, overlooking a small river. She sat down, and Thornpaw looked at her, determination in her eyes.

"We all agreed that this needed to happen. That the two of you needed to be completely alone. I've known you for my whole life, Darkthunder, and we trust you to do this."

"What is g-" Darkthunder began, but her question was abruptly cut

off when she saw a shape padding towards her.

The grey she-cat tread quietly, yet determined as she padded toward Darkpaw. Turning her head slightly, Darkthunder saw the last flash of Thornpaw's tail as the calico padded away. Darkpaw's bright green gaze focussed on the she-cat as she padded forward, the grey cat's eyes glinting in the sunlight.

Darkthunder stared in astonishment as Pebblepaw padded up to her, and sat down on a rock adjacent to hers. Water lapped gently as the stream beside Darkpaw gurgled along, giving a weirdly cheerful setting for such a surely dark meeting.

"Hello, Pebblepaw."

Pebblepaw whisked her tail along her paws and stared at Darkthunder, her expression unreadable. "Hello, Darkpaw. It's been a long time, hasn't it?" her voice quavered slightly. "I know there are things we must discuss."

Chapter 23

Chapter 23

Pebblepaw stood, staring at Darkpaw, waiting for the she-cat to react. She couldn't fathom calling the black cat by her 'warrior name,' because it sent thrills of horror down her pelt. Pebblepaw couldn't think of Darkpaw as anything but Dark*paw,* even though she had her warrior name. She couldn't believe that the two cats had been so close together on ThunderClan territory for so long, and thought of each other so much, but never talked to each otherDarkpaw twitched an ear in indecision, narrowing her eyes. "I guess we do need to talk," she mewed at last, her voice and expression unreadable.

"I wasn't the one who suggested this meeting," Pebblepaw offered, trying to break the awkward silence.

The grass swished as Darkpaw lashed her tail, from atop the boulder where she stood, her ears suddenly laid flat. "Look," she snarled. "I don't know what you expect from me. Do you want me to be all, oh I'm so sorry for what happened two moons ago? Do you want me to say, I forgive you for his death? Do *you* want me to break down, bow before you without question like some cats here are obviously doing, and become your subservient pet? Are you trying to prove that a little bit of kindness is all we need to stop a war?"

Before Pebblepaw could get a word in, Darkpaw kept on going on her tangent, breath raged. "I don't give a fox-dung about any of it. The *thing* happened. You almost died, you should have, you should have d-"

Her words caught in her throat, and Darkpaw wheezed. The black she-cat's piercing green eyes surveyed Pebblepaw, looking at the painful scars and wounds along her flanks. Pebblepaw sat silently, forcing herself to sit through this. She had spent her whole life up until the incident living alongside Darkpaw. The two cats had

hunted together, patrolled together, and Pebblepaw had never known the full extent of all Darkpaw had been going through. All the anger, loneliness, mistrust. *She's evil, though, all cats that did what she did are.* She thought to herself, then added. *But the reason she did it, all of it... I just don't understand.*

Darkpaw looked at her, emotion welling up in her eyes, like a massive thunderstorm wanting to be released. Pebblepaw stared back. She wanted to move, but her paws felt rooted to the rock that she was sitting on. Darkpaw spat out the next words, "What. Has. Changed?" Each word seemed like a struggle for her to get out.

Pebblepaw wasn't sure whether Darkpaw wanted to leap at her, or talk to her. Darkpaw didn't speak, and Pebblepaw looked down at the ground. *She really needs help. We all do. I don't know what to do.*

Eventually, Pebblepaw managed the strength to look up at Darkpaw, and felt horror shrill through her pelt. Her claws were unsheathed and rooted to the rock, her eyes were dark and helpless, and water glittered in their depths, and yet her fur was spiked in anger, too. At that moment, one word came to Pebblepaw, *alone.*

Darkpaw looked at her, "don't you ever just want it to be over?" she snarled.

Pebblepaw stared at her, and found the strength to speak as moonlight pooled down on the river. "Once, I did. After the incident I... felt so useless, so alone. It hurt so much, in here." She pointed at her heart. "At that moment, *he* told me to keep going, and I tried. After that, it didn't magically get better; anxiety and depression still plagued me at night, but I found cats who genuinely loved me, and who I loved back, and the weight started to loosen."

Darkpaw didn't speak, and Pebblepaw found the right words. They were two simple words, but they held a weight of gravity and meaning, far beyond what most cats would think at first glance.

"Look up."

Darkpaw stared at her in bewilderment, and then did. As the two she-cats faced their muzzles to the night sky, a star twinkled.

Nightpaw. For a long time, Pebblepaw looked up, wishing that he would magically appear before them, wave his paw, and make Darkpaw feel less empty. The reality of the matter, though, was that the world didn't work that way. There was no magical instant-world-healing power. There were only cats, who had to make choices that were sometimes very difficult.

Darkpaw let out a heavy sigh, and spoke in an oddly relaxed voice. "After everything happened, I began feeling like I was too far gone. I began thinking it was impossible to change or control everything. After all, I attacked you once, why wouldn't I want to attack you again? What would have changed from then to now?"

Pebblepaw didn't have an answer to that. She simply lowered her head, and sighed.

Darkpaw continued, her eyes still angry and cold. "I almost killed you, but I don't understand an-"

Pebblepaw cut her off and sighed. "The world doesn't work in black and white. I just want you to be happy, Darkpaw. That's all I want for every cat, even ThunderClan. I want you to feel like living, to have friends, again."

Darkpaw stared at her, and Pebblepaw stared back. Eventually, Darkpaw gritted her teeth and dipped her head. "Fine. I'll be a subservient cat," she snarled.

"No. I don't want that. You don't want that either."

Darkpaw tipped her head, her eyes beginning to narrow again as she stared at Pebblepaw. "Look at me," she snarled. "I'm one of Mightystar's pets. I tried to kill you. I'm not even sure if I like you, even now when you're trying to be nice and all to me."

That was when Pebblepaw leaped off the rock and bounded closer to Darkpaw. Darkpaw stared at her uneasily as Pebblepaw leaped up the rock. Their fur brushed, and Darkpaw's face scar glinted in the moonlight.

The black she-cat didn't speak, but she didn't move away either as

they both stared up at the sky. "Night*paw*," Darkpaw whispered, her voice barely audible.

Pebblepaw glanced at her, "I'm really, really sorry," she sighed. "It was all my fault. I broke the rules and convinced him to go hunting. I leaped into an occupied fox den. *I* was too mousebrained to run from the fox, and Nightpaw had to push me out of the way, taking the fatal blow."

Pebblepaw felt tears stream down her face, and she felt utterly miserable. Darkpaw looked at her sharply. "Don't," she muttered. "We've all made mistakes, and besides, yours are barely accountable, compared to mine."

"I am really sorry, though," she mewed bitterly. "I was self-absorbed and reckless at times, which led to you getting hurt."

"You got hurt more than me," Darkpaw rushed out the last part.

Pebblepaw brushed a tear from her face, "we should have talked before the incident," she mewed.

Darkpaw, still staring at the sky, shook her head half-ruefully half-angrily. "I wouldn't have listened," she almost chuckled. "You shouldn't have gone through the mousedung that you did, but... maybe I can use what I've learned about ThunderClan to help you."

Pebblepaw swished her tail, muscles tightening as it flicked across Darkpaw's back. Darkpaw's eyes gleamed as she finally looked back at Pebblepaw, and a hesitant half smile flicked across Darkpaw's face as her green eyes gleamed, "I know Thunderclan secrets, I think this could work."

The two cats sat in silence for what felt like seasons. The fragile silence was only broken by a low mew from Darkpaw.
"I'll do it for Nightpaw."

"We don't have to become buddies, you know," Pebblepaw mewed hesitantly.

"But we can be allies. Yeah, I get it; you'll never trust me again, and that's fine. Everything about this is *fine.* I don't care." Darkthunder

looked deep into Pebblepaw's eyes, and Pebblepaw got the uncomfortable feeling that Darkthunder wasn't as 'fine' as she was trying to make out to be.

Pebblepaw dipped her head in thanks, as Darkpaw stared blankly at the night sky, her tail lashing to and fro. Pebblepaw turned at the slight sound of rustling bushes. She twisted her ears in hopes that she could pick up any other sounds. Darkthunder stared blankly ahead, a lost look glistening in her eyes.

Just then, Pebblepaw heard a vibrant yowling sound from the bushes nearby. As she watched, a dog bounded out of the bushes, yapping and snarling furiously. It was black with spots of brown, and a long muzzle. Its mouth was twisted in hate, revealing long, sharp fangs as it stared out at the two she-cats. A bright red two-leg caller was tightly wrapped around its neck, marking it as a two-leg pet.

Pebblepaw turned, wide-eyed to see Darkpaw bounding down from the rock that she was on, bunching up her muscles to spring. Darkpaw turned back and let out a half-grin. "Now this," she chuckled. "This is the stuff I like to do."

Pebblepaw bounded down the rock and turned to Darkpaw, who had already slid out her claws in eager anticipation. The dog's jaws salivated and it took one pace forward. Pebblepaw blinked at Darkpaw and tightened her muscles.

"Let's do this."

The sound of the dog whimpering and cats yowling echoed all around in the clearing. Pebblepaw had made a tentative alliance with Darkpaw, but would that be enough? Could she truly rally up the cats together? Pebblepaw knew that either she would, or she would die trying.

Chapter 24

Chapter 24

*Brown, dusty leaves swirled i*n the corner of *Darkthunder's* vision as the pure black she-cat padded stiffly toward ThunderClan camp. The leaves had been lifted off the musty forest floor by a swift gust of wind. Oak trees that were above her were cold and unwelcoming in the twilight, and crisp air promised the soon arrival of even colder weather. Leaf-bare had arrived, even if the snow, which frequently was the main association with the season, had yet to fall. Darkthunder missed her home in RiverClan even more, now that she saw how leaf-bare fell on ThunderClan. It suffocated her, making her paws sway and her chest tighten more and more with every step. *Soon.*

Her paws crackled and smashed on the dry forest mulch; there was no point in being quiet anymore. She wanted ThunderClan to find her, wanted to snarl and hiss at them, claw their pelts off. *Not yet. I have a mission,* she tried to remind herself.

As Darkthunder padded onwards, her mind kept flitting back to Boulderpaw, and their fight with her ex-mentor, Firbush. Boulderpaw, having wounds that were still bright red and painful, had reluctantly agreed to stay in the camp instead of travelling back with her. *Loyal mousebrain,* she thought, with only a slight prickle of irritation. *I mean, but why would a ThunderClan cat do that? That recklessness will be the end of him, I swear.* She couldn't forget that moment when Boulderpaw had launched himself with full force at Firbush. Somehow, seeing a cat risk their life for *her* had reminded Darkthunder of what being a true warrior meant. She wanted to be that cat, the one who stood up for others instead of standing over them.

As Darkthunder padded around a particularly massive gnarled oak tree, the ThunderClan camp came into view. *Pebblepaw...* Now, Pebblepaw was certainly a cat who liked to stand over others. Darkthunder shook her head, reminding herself that now was not

the time to try to convince herself that harming Pebblepaw had been the right thing to do all those moons ago.

The ThunderClan camp was, really, much more of a fortress than the cosy RiverClan camp could ever be. There were massive brambles, rocks, and branches enclosing the camp from others, towering at least two foxlengths into the air. The dusty pelts of Tinypelts flashed in the moonlight as the servant cats worked, securing every patch in the outer wall. It reminded Darkthunder of how vulnerable RiverClan truly was, open to invasion.

"Hey, you!" A sharp voice took Darkthunder out of her musings.

Darkthunder suppressed the urge to wince away as the stinking scent of ThunderClan bathed her throat. She had reached the barrier tunnel without realising it. Swiftclaw was padding toward her, tail lashing to and fro, eyes narrowed to slits. Around her, a few Tinypelts arched their backs, although their eyes were round with curious fear instead of outright hostility.

"So, the great 'hero' returned," Swiftclaw snapped, blunt as always. "You realise how bad this looks, right? Disappear for almost a quarter moon, and then return with mint on you. *Mint.* Even a kit knows that cats use that to hide their scent."

Darkthunder lashed her tail, suppressing the urge to leap at Swiftclaw, and bury her fangs deep into the smug she-cat's fur. "No need to get huffy," she tried and failed to keep the snarl out of her voice. "I was just-"

Pebblepaw had chatted with Darkthunder about what she was supposed to say. Or, more so, Pebblepaw had calmly suggested quietly walking in and taking punishment and Darkthunder had disagreed. She knew that true warriors fought, and Pebblepaw's whole group was going about ending the war in all the wrong ways. So, Darkthunder was going to fight. She was going to tell the truth, and it was going to hurt ThunderClan.

"Just what?" Swiftclaw snapped at her.

"Take me to Mightystar. There's a conniving group who want you

guys dead."

"A what?" Swiftclaw flicked up her ears in astonishment.

Good, Darkthunder thought to herself, as the she-cat looked more bewildered and confused than hostile. She rounded her green eyes imploringly at Swiftclaw.

"See the fresh scratch marks," she offered with a purr, nodding to the wounds on her flank.

Swiftclaw stared at her for one moment longer, emotions warring in her piercing eyes. Eventually, it was a doubtful look that came to her narrowed eyes. She turned to one of the small, young Tinypelts and twitched her tail tip ever so slightly.

Instantly, the jet-black tom raced through the barrier tunnel and out of sight. He was gone so quickly, that Darkthunder almost convinced herself that the tom had never been there at all. Swiftclaw didn't speak, merely turned to pad away.

"She'll deal with you," the calico mewed, without looking back. "I have other matters to attend to. I trust these Tinypelts to keep you... safe." Swiftclaw turned and addressed a lanky she-cat. "Beanleg, your kits won't be getting any food for the next quarter moon if you let our friend escape."

Beanleg fluffed up her pelt, and a determined look flashed across her face, "yes," she murmured quietly as Swiftclaw disappeared from view behind a towering oak.

Darkthunder fluffed up her pelt against the leaf-bare chill. Three Tinypelts surrounded her, Beanleg facing her. Quick as a snake, the brown she-cat padded toward Darkthunder. She bent closer to Darkthunder's ear and, so quietly and quickly that it was as though the wind itself had spoken, mewed, "half the Tinypelts have your support, they knew about the peaceful uprising and will support you, but we won't fight or abandon our clan. The other half won't let out the secret."

Darkthunder blinked, and suddenly the brown she-cat was staring a

few tail lengths in front of her again, staring out impassively at the distant pine trees. She shivered as the twilight darkened, into a late dusk. The three cats who surrounded her weren't... allies per say, but it did give her some hope that not all ThunderClan cats were mindless monsters.

Mightystar did pick her Tinypelts well. Darkthunder thought of all the cats she had seen who were Tinypelts. They were all scrawny, nervous, cowardly cats who would show their bellies to anyone who promised them sanctuary. *Not something I can sympathise with, but fine, I guess.* Out of any cat in the clans, Darkthunder had learned that it was often the differences in cats that drove them apart instead of bringing them together.

"Come, walk with me, my loyal warrior."

Darkthunder was abruptly brought out of her musings by a high-pitched kit-like voice that immediately made her uneasy. She turned just in time to see Mightystar padding toward her, licking a scrap of moss out of her soft white fur. Darkthunder suppressed a mrow of laughter; it was clear the leader had been sleeping.

"Er, I can help you-" Darkthunder saw the young black Tinypelt, barely older than her, bending toward a green wad of moss on Mightystar's ear with a look of deep anxiety on his face.

Mightystar slid out her claws, and purred. "Not if you don't want a scar like Darkthunder's on your face, Nightjump." She fixed the four Tinypelts with a friendly gaze as the scrawny cats bunched together fearfully. "You seem exhausted, why don't you four get some rest and share that small juicy vole on the freshkill pile."

As Darkthunder watched the four cats pad away, the shadows swallowing them quickly, she felt a tail tip on her shoulder.

Mightystar's pure white pelt was illuminated in the gloom, almost as though she was a spirit cat herself. "Walk with me," she mewed, her face entirely unreadable.

Darkthunder hesitated. Even if ThunderClan camp was a fortress that looked exactly out of elder nightmare stories, it was a thousand

times better than walking with the tiny pure white she-cat who had pristine blue eyes.

Reluctantly, Darkthunder padded side by side with Mightystar out of camp. She *wanted* to show the she-cat her claws, and desired so strongly to see those blue eyes turn lifeless. Mightystar was just one cat, it surely wasn't that hard to slit her throat, even if she was an evil dictator who had destroyed the lives of dozens.

The two cats moved like matching shadows, slinking around oak trees, leaping roots, and ducking under large branches. Darkthunder wondered where on ThunderClan territory they were. The meager number of patrols she had done hadn't allowed her to map out the entire territory in her head, like she could on RiverClan land. Gradually, Mightstar's pace began to slow, but she didn't turn back towards Darkthunder. The two cats pushed through a screen of lichen and into a clearing. Darkthunder's eyes widened at the sight.

Eventually, Mightystar sat back on her haunches, and raised a small white forepaw. "We stop here," she mewed casually.

Darkthunder stood stiffly. She had expected Mightystar to have led her to a dark cave with hundreds of skulls. Instead, the two cats were in a moonlit clearing, only seven or so foxlengths wide, open to the sky. Where Mightystar had sat down, there was a reflected pool, which stars seemed to twinkle and dance on.

"Come. Sit," Mightstar ordered when Darkthunder didn't move, only stared in awe.

She couldn't suppress her amazement of the gorgeous clearing as she padded hesitantly forward. It was only when Mightystar turned and fixed her welcoming blue gaze on her that Darkthunder hesitated. *Is she trying to take me off guard and kill me?*

"It's... nice," Darkthunder mumbled awkwardly as she sat a tail length away from Mightystar.

Mightystar rolled her eyes, clearly bemused. "You aren't one for beauty and sentimentals, are you?" she purred. "That's fine, plenty of mine aren't."

Darkthunder stared wordlessly at the clan leader and then down at the stream that the two cats were sitting beside. She wanted to cut to the chase, to growl at Mightystar, to tell the leader all that she wanted to say, but oddly her jaws were moving but no words were coming out.

Mightystar blinked at her slowly, her perceptive blue gaze taking in every motion that Darkthunder was making. "I always came here as an apprentice and young warrior. All the other cats were so caught up in their own affairs that they scarcely gave me a second glance when I slipped out of camp. 'Oh there goes *Tinypelt,'* both the young and old cats would mock me. 'She won't go far, poor *thing*.'"

Darkthunder felt unease ripple through her pelt, along with confusion. If Mightystar was trying to get her off topic, it certainly was working. Mightstar flicked her tail and chuckled in her high-pitched sort of way.

"In the end it was *them* that were the 'poor things'. I trained hard, I fought the system, and I won. All by myself." She purred, "It's so easy to take the lives of those cats when you don't care for them. Now everything and every cat is mine."

As Darkthunder looked uneasy, Mightystar mewed, "But that's not why you're here, is it. Oh, don't think I didn't notice Icefall returning to camp, covered in the tell-tale scent of mint, how she looked at me with particular contempt."

Darkthunder opened her jaws, preparing to launch into her stream of half-truths, lies and truths, but Mightystar cut her off. "I *know* what happens on my territory," she mewed. "I *know* exactly what happened. So she's trying to start a rebellion. A conspiracy."

Perfect! Darkthunder prepared to launch into her lie about Icefall being the one to release all the hostages when Mightystar spoke, "She tried to kill you and that grey furred 'paw, because you made her angry." Mightstar gave Darkthunder a wry 'we all know you're very good at that' look, and continued, "She freed the hostages because she always wanted to betray me, her and that RiverClan cat, Pebble. She blames it on you, because, two birds with one stone, and returns to camp serene and smug as ever."

Darkthunder felt amazement at how close Mightystar had come to the truth, along with alarm that she quickly tried to cover up. If Mightystar knew that Icefall had been the one to attack her, and Pebblepaw had been the one to initiate the hostage escape, what else did she know? Suddenly the thought of killing Mightystar seemed immensely more difficult, even with the she-cat standing right in front of her. Mightystar was smart, and she wasn't afraid to show her claws where they were needed.

"Darkthunder?" Mightystar asked, and Darkthunder suddenly wondered how long Mightystar had been watching her think. She gave the she-cat a knowing look. "Where you and the apprentice were, hm?" she prompted.

Darkthunder suddenly didn't want to fight Mightystar, or moreso she realised that she couldn't fight her and live. "Icefall told me about your parentage," she blurted out, not having had enough time to think about what to say regarding her whereabouts. *Of course, Pebblepaw didn't think through all of this.*

Mightstar suddenly looked shocked, her fur bushing up, and her blue eyes narrowing for the first time in the whole meeting. "And what did she say?" Mightystar mewed, her voice icy.

"That... she kitted you."

Mightystar stared at her, "Oh, don't hold back, my loyal warrior," she murmured. "I can tell very clearly that there's more than *that* going on."

Darkthunder scarcely hesitated under Mightystar's unfriendly gaze. She certainly was mighty. Darkthunder would have rather faced a whole patrol of enemy warriors instead of Mightystar. "Firbush is your father," she blurted out.

"Firbush." Mightystar echoed the word like a sour taste had come to her mouth. "Firbush, huh? Icefall always kept her jaws shut about that one, and her closest ally, Salamanderclaw never let out a peep, even when I threatened her with becoming my first ever hostage.

"Huh," Darkthunder echoed half to herself.

It was clear that Mightystar hadn't known that the dark brown RiverClan warrior was her father, and yet it scarcely fazed her. The white she-cat simply stared at Darkthunder, a hint of curiosity in her eyes. *Have I convinced her that she can trust me yet?*

Eventually, Mightystar let out a chuff of air, "you certainly are a... unique cat, my loyal warrior. You have many strengths; fearless, alert, quick-witted, I hope you understand the consequences of disloyalty in my clan."

"I do, and I understand that RiverClan will be destroyed soon," Darkthunder blurted out.

Mightystar stared at the slowly flowing river beside her, "I don't think all kill them all," she mewed. "I am not, if anything, a cold-blooded murderer with no motivation. I have goals. Sometimes cats get in the way of said goals, and they need to be dealt with. I think you understand that, hm?" she gave Darkthunder a knowing look.

"Yeah." Darkthunder knew she was referencing Pebblepaw. "Yeah, I do."

The grass fronds swayed as Mightystar got to her paws and stood up. She brushed her tail comfortingly on Darkthunder's spine. "It's nice when you find a cat whose goals align so perfectly with yours. A cat who understands when claws need to be shown."

Darkthunder flicked her ear when Mightystar spoke again. "We've done enough waiting around. I've indulged that group of hostages to escape and smell freedom for a little bit, but the time for games is over. We destroy RiverClan, a quarter moon from *tonight."*

Darkthunder looked up, feeling alarm pulsate deep in her paws. "A-a quarter moon?!" she stammered out. *Things have been starting to get stable, I thought we could figure something out, but now...*

Mightystar stared at her. "Yes. It's time to end this."

With her final words, Mightystar rapidly raced away through the trees with the grace and power of a ThunderClan and RiverClan warrior, despite her small size. Within moments, only Darkthunder

remained in the small clearing, flicking her tail through the stream that lay beside her.

Mightystar is a complex cat, Darkthunder thought to herself, with more than just a small hint of respect. *It's always interesting to think what would have happened, had things been different.* Darkthunder imagined working beside Mightystar, helping the she-cat choose the best paths. If she had been a ThunderClan warrior, though, maybe she would want to help Mightystar choose even bloodier paths.

As Darkthunder sat in the clearing, she tried to work through her confused thoughts. One thing that she respected about Mightystar was her desire to change the system. It was rare that someone once seen as weak and useless rose Mightystar's position in power.

A quarter moon... I need to tell Pebblepaw. If we don't prepare, we'll die. And yes, I will die for freedom, Pebblepaw no matter what our grievances may be.

As Darkthunder turned away, and padded toward ThunderClan camp, a camp full of enemies, the sun began to rise. The sun swallowed up the night and the shadows, turning the sky to vibrant shades of red and purple.

Chapter 25

Chapter 25

Pebblepaw blinked between Min, Thornpaw, and Batpaw, her friends. They all looked so different now, so much *older.* Batpaw no longer had his friendly amiable personality; he glowered out at every movement in the bushes as if it was going to attack him and his friends. Thornpaw never seemed to be in the moment, always stressing over everything that needed to be done. And Min, she seemed to take it the hardest of all. Her lilac eyes were dark and round as though she had seen nothing but pain. Min, who had always had such a way of bringing cats up, had no cat to bring her up from her pit of misery. *I can try, though.*

The four cats had gathered in a small cave where all the hostages had been sleeping, in between Twoleg-place and clan territory. All four of them were sitting on a patch of bright green moss, which lit up the cave, and gave it an eerie, ominous feel. *Darkthunder just told us... the war is in less than a quarter moon...*

Pebblepaw was afraid they were all going to die. She had seen first paw how vulnerable cats truly were. She had seen how many twisted ways there were to hurt, and not enough ways to heal.

"Seven or so former hostages remaining. That angry reckless clan cat group only wants to claw every cat to pieces; not really a help. RiverClan cats are dying by the day." That was Min's listless voice.

Pebblepaw winced, but said nothing. She stared at Min blankly, wordlessly. All the other cats in the cave glanced at Min briefly, before dropping their gazes to the ground.

"How in the mousedung do we even know how RiverClan is doing?" Batpaw snarled at the ground. "I mean, we haven't even been there for who knows how long. It's so selfish staying here, I want to go home, and see Mom and Dad."

Thornpaw wordlessly shifted closer to Batpaw, and the grey and white tom buried his muzzle in his littermate's neck fur and whimpered forlornly like a lost kit.

"We can't," his littermate mewed, her voice pained. "If we so much as step near ThunderClan territory, they'll find us. And don't tell me we should walk around the long way, or through fourtrees, because that won't work. Mightystar is *everywhere*." Her voice was matter of fact.

Pebblepaw winced, "everyone, cut it out." She was aware of the tremor in her voice. "We can't sulk here, or cower in fear like rabbits, we have to *do* something."

She tried to put confidence in her gaze as the three cats gazed at her. "Well, if anycat deserves a bit of sulking, it's us," Batpaw mewed.

"No!" Pebblepaw snapped, surprising herself and the other cats by the ferocity in her voice. They stared at her as if she had suddenly grown another head. Min practically jumped, as though she had just realised they were all in a cave together "Look, self-pity never got anycat anywhere. In fact, I've felt worse after that. We must stand up and fight the system, fight for change!"

"How?" Min asked bleakly.

Pebblepaw hesitated, she needed to make a choice, and make one fast. These cats needed someone to help them, and Pebblepaw would find that cat for them. She swished her tail over the rocky floor, picking up stray pieces of dry moss as it brushed them. Pebblepaw was surprised by how quickly the idea flashed into her head, as though she had known the answer all along. *Claws are only so strong, there are some instances where it calls for more.*

"We fight Mightystar, but not with claws. We fight her with words, with the truth. And we fight her in the next quarter moon, before any other cats *die.*"

Pebblepaw was honestly disappointed by the sceptical and pitying looks that came after her short speech.

Thornpaw, who was comforting Batpaw, rose to her paws, and flicked her tail at Pebblepaw. "That's all well, and good," she mewed. "But, Peb, surely you've seen by now that the world doesn't work that way. I know ThunderClan isn't evil," she put in as Pebblepaw opened her jaws to protest, "but I don't know how you plan to talk *Mightystar* to submission."

Pebblepaw blinked at her slowly, "We have the support of the Tinypelts, we took away the hostages; that's half Mightystar's cats, I'd guess. All we need to do is convince the others to follow another cat instead of Mightystar. Darkpaw, or Darkthunder, I guess, talked about a cat named Smokeblaze who is an older warrior. Maybe we could convince the other cats to follow him."

Min who'd been licking the same spot of fur on her chest repeatedly looked up, "Yeah, I'm sure that would work, Peb," she purred, but Pebblepaw guessed the she-cat had no idea what they'd been talking about. *How can I help you, Min?*

"Er, yeah, thanks Min." Pebblepaw mewed. "Mightystar isn't popular with many cats, that's what Darkthunder said. She's vile, and has supporters, but there are also cats who fear her wrath. This won't end in bloodshed, it will end in peace."

The other cats weren't convinced yet, and Pebblepaw respected that. She knew how hard it was to overcome all that they were going through. *Nightpaw.* That name meant so much to Pebblepaw. His death had caused her spiral, but the way he had always acted had convinced Pebblepaw that this was going to work. They were going to end the war, or die trying.

"Hey, Min?" Pebblepaw bounced on her paws. Min was still sitting at the back of the cave, encompassed in shadow. Her tail brushed the ground as she looked up at Pebblepaw, and padded heavily to her paws.

Pebblepaw turned to see Thornpaw guiding Batpaw gently out into the sunlight. She gave Pebblepaw a rueful smile, and Pebblepaw dipped her head in response, appreciation gleaming in her eyes. Thornpaw had always helped her so much with her health after Nightpaw's death. It was clear the young cat would do anything for

her closest friends; those were the sorts of cats that always seemed in short supply these days.

The bracken rustled, signifying the departure of Thornpaw and Batpaw, and Pebblepaw turned back toward Min, who was just nosing her way out of the den. As Min emerged into the sunlight, it was clear that she was upset, her fur was pressed against her scrawny frame, and she didn't even acknowledge Pebblepaw as she walked away in the opposite direction of Thornpaw and Batpaw.

What's up with her? Pebblepaw thought, as the last part of Min's grey and lilac dappled tail whisked through the bracken and out of sight. Of course, if it had been anycat besides Min who had slunk away, Pebblepaw would have assumed they were upset, but Min was different. She was always so spunky and lively, so why did she look so down?

For a few moments, Pebblepaw merely sat in the clearing, watching the blades of grass swish to and fro, and the leaves whistle softly in the breeze. It felt so peaceful here, so relaxing. It was rare, these days, that Pebblepaw got a moment to herself. A moment just to breathe, just to *exist,* without all the problems swirling out of control.

She let the tension in her rigid muscles relax, and felt her breathing slow. It was exhausting, trying to sort out what was going on, especially since every day felt grimmer and grimmer. Except, now there was a slight moment of peace.

Pebblepaw's legs felt suddenly heavy as she looked at the sun, brilliant and vibrant as ever in the sky. She let herself sink into the grass. *How are you, so cheerful all the time, sun?* Pebblepaw felt as though she was drifting far, far away, into a world where there was no worries, no pain, no trials or tribulations, there was just peace. Pebblepaw welcomed the darkness as it gently and quickly enfolded her.

"Look! I'm a scary slime monster going to catch you!"

"Ick. No fair, Lilykit, you got a head start."

The grey she-cat watches the two kits playing in the dirt, rolling around until they are entirely submerged in icky brown mud. Around her, RiverClan camp is bustling with activity, warriors flitting in and out of dens, cheerfully talking to one another. The she-cat wonders when she has ever felt so at peace. She watches as an apprentice races in the pawsteps of their mentor out of camp and into the forest that surrounds one side of RiverClan camp.

She vaguely wonders how she has gotten here, and who she is, as she stares out at the camp. RiverClan? Apprentice? The grey she-cat with the blue eyes tries to think, but there seems to be only fuzz. The sun shines clear and bright above her, as the she-cat attempts to rest her eyes.

"PEBBLESTAR!" The grey she-cat turns her head slowly, at the sound of a high pitched voice irritatingly close to her ear. She wonders who this cat is and why they are screaming so loudly.

The scarred grey she-cat blinks her eyes slowly to adjust to the brightness of the day, wishing that there was more time to sleep and not worry about things. *Worry? Why would I be worried...?*

She turns her head slowly to look downwards as the sound of high pitched excited mewling starts again. She sighs inwardly, privately thankful that she doesn't have any kits herself...*or do I?*

The grey she-cat stares down at the kit. He is dark grey with swirling black stripes and a white-dappled tail. He is practically grinning from ear to ear. The she-cat finds a strange swell of affection deep inside her for this kit, but isn't sure why. The kit jumps up and down excitedly on the sun-drenched rock.

Strangely, the she-cat finds herself opening her jaws and speaking to the bundle of fur bouncing around her paws. "Nightkit?! What are you doing, pesky furball!" She speaks affectionately, as though this cat is someone she loves dearly.

"Sorry, Pebblestar! I know you're ultra busy and stuff, but maybe we could spend some time together like... right now?!" The dark grey tom swishes his tail happily as though Pebblestar has already told him she has time.

Pebblestar? The name sounds almost familiar to the she-cat as she stares down at the kit. She thinks hard, but that blackness in her head refuses to give way. After some very hard thinking, the she-cat thinks she remembers a Pebble-something cat. She wonders if it was somecat she knew a long time ago, maybe even when she was as young as this bashful, joyous kit.

The grey she-cat opens her jaws to respond, but that is when the setting around her changes, slowly at first, but then faster, and faster, and faster. Dreams cascade over her. Starlit cats touching her nose, a friend lying beside her as she weeps over a kit, a battleground strewn with bodies of cats she loves and despises, a black she-cat with claws outstretched looming above her, a tom pushing her out of the way of a fox, two spirit cats standing over a labouring mother, while a pale grey tom snarls at them.

Within the darkness, the she-cat wonders how she has had such vivid dreams, but then she muses that maybe these aren't dreams. She toys with the idea that maybe these are memories, or possibly even the future.

The grey she-cat feels herself falling, slowly at first, drifting downwards and downwards. All the while, she sees nothing, only blackness around her. Oddly, the she-cat is not afraid of the spiralling darkness, but welcomes it with a half purr. She feels so happy here, drifting in emptiness. The she-cat wishes she could stay here forever, but then reminds herself that she can't. There is something, many somethings that she has to do before she rests like this, feels this peace again. Then the she-cat is afraid, but she comforts herself that she can survive, if she takes everything one careful pawstep at a time.

She has no need to worry about the future, or the past. She simply has to focus on the present, and focus on what she can do to help. Even though the she-cat doesn't know what she needs to do, she feels comforted by this thought. And, she wouldn't be alone, either. There were others.

The she-cat knows that the peace is coming to an end, and she is okay with that. She knows that one day soon, she will feel it again, and that until then, she will find other ways to be happy. The she-

cat smiles, and prepares for it all to come back to her.

When Pebblepaw awoke, Min was sitting beside her, eyes looking alarmed. "You were mewing some strange things, Peb," Min offered, staring at Pebblepaw in confusion.

Pebblepaw stared at Min. "Was I?"

Pebblepaw tried to strain her mind and remember what she had been dreaming about. Something about it had been comforting, but now that memories of the real world were coming back, Pebblepaw felt her anxiety begin to creep in again. Eventually, the sole thing that the dream left Pebblepaw with, was a feeling that she had to fight for her home, because everyone else was scared to.

Min turned away awkwardly. "Sorry to disturb you, buddy. I guess I'll be going now."

Pebblepaw felt her heart ache as Min looked down at the ground hopelessly. Her paws seemed rooted to the earth, but eventually, Min got to her paws. But before she could turn away, Pebblepaw burst out. "No, wait!"

Min's shoulder fur fluffed up, and she turned to face Pebblepaw. "Yes? Is there anything I can help you with?"

Despite her tired appearance, Min faced Pebblepaw resolutely. Pebblepaw stared at her friend, noticing for the first time, now that Min was out of the den, how *drained* her friend looked. Every single part of Min seemed to be drooping slightly, yet there was a visible determination in her eyes.

"You don't look so good, Peb," Min was staring at Pebblepaw in concern. "I think you need some rest and recovery, buddy. You practically fell asleep on your paws, looking for me."

Pebblepaw let out a dry laugh, staring at Min, whose eyes were round with concern. "You're the one who's tired, Min."

Min glanced at her, eyes soft. "It's a lot," she admitted. "But if anything, I'm glad to be doing it with you, Thornpaw, Batpaw, and all the other cats."

Pebblepaw glanced at her. "I just wish we were more unified," she said ruefully.

Min's eyes suddenly lit up, and she began flicking her tail to and fro. Pebblepaw glanced at her in concern.

"Wha-" she began, but Min cut her off.

"What if we had a name? Something that brought us together, represented our cause!"

Pebblepaw turned to see a startled mouse scuttle into her path. She saw Min's ribs, and pounced on the prey. It got ahead of her, but Min cornered it, and killed it with a swift bite to the throat.

"We work great as a team, Pebblepaw." Min purred as she brought the mouse over to Pebblepaw.

"That's it!" Pebblepaw exclaimed.

"What?" Min began to take a hesitant bite into the mouse, before nudging it towards Pebblepaw.

"What if we called ourselves the Paws United."

Min's eyes lit up, and she purred. "Paws United!"

Chapter 26

Chapter 26

"Just you wait, mange. I'll get you. I will make you sorry that you ever existed!"

Darkthunder slid out her claws in frustration, as she watched the two cats fight. It seemed to her, that both of them were fighting for their lives, desperation making their blows stronger and fiercer.

She had returned to ThunderClan camp the previous day, and everything since then had gone from bad to worse for ThunderClan. For a start, two of the Tinypelts had 'mysteriously disappeared,' only for one of them to have been spotted by a ThunderClan patrol mingling with one of the rebel cats. The tom had been dragged into camp, biting and scratching all the way. *Not to mention a literal war is less than a quarter moon away.*

When thrown before Mightystar, instead of doing something sensible like lying, or smoothing over the tension, the tom had tried to attack ThunderClan's glorious leader. Angered and shocked, Mightystar had ordered some cat to deal with the menace that lay before her. The cat that asked to be the sole one to finish off the apprentice Tinypelt had been his own littermate, Roachpaw.

Roachpaw. Darkthunder knew very little about the she-cat, other than that she was completely and utterly loyal to Mightystar. Every morning, the rose and ginger dappled she-cat started her day by bowing before Mightystar's den and solemnly letting out vows of dedication and loyalty. It was scary, really, but no ThunderClan cat even paid her much attention. In fact, there were several others that also bowed before Mightystar's den and glorified the dirt she walked on.

Pulling her gaze back to the fight, she saw the wiry tom, Creampaw darting in and out, always narrowly avoiding Roachpaw's maddened blows. Around her, there was a seething, silent crowd of

ThunderClan warriors. All of them were fixated on Roachpaw and Creampaw as if they were eying a particularly delicious piece of freshkill.

Darkthunder let out an involuntary shiver as she felt ice trickle into her veins. Roachpaw almost pinned Creampaw down, until the apprentice swiftly moved away, genuine horror flashing in his eyes. It was scary, really, how this situation paralleled her own fight with Pebblepaw.

This sort of stuff happens a lot, I guess. Eventually, the older you get, you just stop caring, after all, what can you do? Darkthunder shuffled her paws, feeling painfully aware that she was doing *nothing* to help in this devastating world that the cats were living in.

Darkthunder glanced to her left, to see how the cats around her were reacting. Ravenfire glanced at the two fighting cats with a despondent gaze, her fluffy tail flicking to and fro in agitation. Under Darkthunder's piercing gaze, Ravenfire suddenly stiffened. Her gaze darted around nervously, as though she knew that somecat was watching her. Before Darkthunder could look away, Ravenfire's perceptive gaze settled on her. The black she-cat rolled her eyes emphatically to Darkthunder before turning away to watch the fight. Darkthunder instantly knew what the she-cat was thinking; *get this scrap over with. I've got better things to do than watch kits fight to the death.*

Darkthunder sighed inwardly. She knew that Roachpaw was a vengeful cat, especially since Darkthunder had been promoted before Roachpaw, even though Roachpaw had been in ThunderClan longer. Roachpaw was dangerous. She was the sort of cat who would be kind to your face, and then attack you when you least expected it.

Creampaw ducked away, and made a desperate escape toward the tight circle of cats. A brown tom with a scarred chest known as Clawheart, pushed him back into the ring and towards Roachpaw. Creampaw's eyes widened as Roachpaw slashed her claws right where his throat had been. It caught the young tom's ear, and sliced half of it clean off. Blood began to drip down his face.

"Finish it off!" Forestcrunch bellowed to his apprentice, Roachpaw.

Roachpaw didn't speak, merely leaped at Creampaw again. Creampaw staggered back, blinded by the blood on his face. Quick as a snake, Roachpaw leaped onto Creampaw's back and pummeled him to the ground. She raised her paw to strike the final blow.

"No!" a she-cat's enraged voice sounded.

Darkthunder turned to see a small Tinypelt named Littlesnow darting to the front of the crowd. Eagletalon, the clan deputy, tried to hold her back, but the she-cat forced her way through.

"What are you doing?" she snarled savagely at all the cats.

Roachpaw stared at her, eyes widening in curiosity. Creampaw struggled beneath her, but Roachpaw dug her claws in deep, and blood gushed out of his throat.

The Tinypelt glowered defiance at all of them. Darkthunder stared at her, trying to remember if she'd met this cat before. She guessed she hadn't, especially because of how savage the Tinypelt was being.

"Are you all mousebrained? Where is our clan's respect?" Littlesnow snarled at all the cats. "We are ThunderClan, fierce and noble. We aren't rogues!"

Eagletalon glowered at her. "You're mad," he sniffed. "You shouldn't have come back after your temporary exile."

Littlesnow didn't respond, instead she turned to Roachpaw. Creampaw's eyes had rolled to the back of his head, and he looked almost unresponsive, except for the small rise and fall of his chest.

"That cat was like a little brother to me," Littlesnow's voice lost all of its rage, to be replaced with dull grief. "And you killed him."

Roachpaw stared at Littlesnow eyes blank and cold. "He deserved it."

Littlesnow's eyes were furious. "One day, you will pay for this."

She whirled around, only to be met by Eagletalon. He leaped atop her, and pinned her down with ease. His claws dug into Littlesnow's shoulders, but she only glowered up at him.

"Take her away," Mightystar's voice resounded from where she stood, high above all the other cats. "We'll deal with it later. For now, we have bigger problems to attend to than eliminating our entire population of Tinypelts."

Darkthunder glanced at Mightystar's dismissive tone. She glanced around as a few Tinypelts gathered around to carry Creampaw's body away. Their gazes were grief-stricken and horrified, although most of the cats didn't seem to care. She even noticed a few cats congratulating Roachpaw on her success.

"H-hey?" Darkthunder turned to see the Tinypelt, Nightjump looking at her nervously.

"What?" she mumbled under her breath, not looking at him.

"Your pals... you think they can help?"

Darkthunder straightened her muscles as Nightjump spoke, and looked around nervously. To her relief, no cats were looking at her. They were all heading over to where Mightystar was, at the base of her den. Darkthunder assumed they were going to have Roachpaw's warrior ceremony.

When she turned to Nightjump, his gaze was fixed on Creampaw. The young tom was surrounded by a throng of Tinypelts, all murmuring softly to one another. As she watched, Creampaw stirred weakly. Darkthunder doubted that Pebblepaw's cats could help Creampaw, though.

"That kit's a survivor," Nightjump glanced at her desperately. "Trust me, he just needs herbs and a place to be safe..."

"Promise me you'll all help in the battle in less than a quarter moon, then." Darkthunder rounded on Nightjump, pretending to fluff up her fur in irritation at him.

She hoped that would make any wandering eyes not look too

closely at their discussion. Nightjump looked briefly disconcerted, his tail lashing to and fro as though he was still in denial that there was going to be a battle. Eventually he sighed softly.

"Fine, yes. You're right. It's time. Time to stand up and fight." Nightjump was trembling, but his eyes were shining brighter than the moon. "We all will support you."

"You'll find them between the twolegplace and ThunderClan territory." Darkthunder nodded to the other Tinypelts.

"Beat it!" Darkthunder snarled at Nightjump for show as the cat raced away.

Several cats turned to look at her eyes sympathetic or irritated. Darkthunder nodded and padded toward the ThunderClan warriors. *That's it then, all the allies we're going to get. All that's left is to prepare RiverClan before it's too late.*

Chapter 27

Chapter 27

"Let's do this."

Pebblepaw glanced between the cats that sat before her. Their eyes were all gleaming with desperation. She knew it was time, and felt it deep in her bones that they would need to make their first move soon. There were almost two dozen cats which lay sitting in a semi circle around her, Mack, Thornpaw, Batpaw, and Min.

Two dozen was certainly a lot of cats, as Mack had helpfully pointed out while they had been preparing for the meeting. Two dozen, that was probably almost as many as ThunderClan. Thornpaw had then calmly butted in, and pointed out to Mack that most of the cats were kittypets, loners, and rogues with little to no experience in clan battles. Min had shared a glance with Pebblepaw, silently acknowledging their shared plan. Pebblepaw dipped her head. *The time for silence is at an end.* Before she had had any more time to discuss her plan with the other cats, the massive meeting had commenced. *A quarter moon, and we'll see payoff! Or we'll all be in StarClan...*

"So what are we gonna do? I say we fight it out. Let's kill 'em all!" Pebblepaw sighed inwardly as a young silver furred she-cat pipped up.

They had forgotten about these cats. The young group of cats from all the clans, except ThunderClan, that included Carptuft and a few other of his rambunctious friends. While they had initially seemed like the tide-changing ally, the reckless gang of young warriors was proving to be less and less reliable. They were all naive, and really just wanted to fight ThunderClan, while not thinking of the consequences for their actions. *Killing is exactly what we don't want. I don't want anycat, not even a mangy ThunderClan warrior to have to die if it can be avoided.*

Spike looked at the she-cat solemnly. "No," the young tom mewed. "We aren't out for blood."

He glanced at Boulderpaw, and lightly touched the ThunderClan tom's shoulder. Boulderpaw was sitting hunched at the back of the crowd, his eyes round and petrified. Mossypaws hadn't come, and instead had, very wisely Pebblepaw now realised, decided to stay in ThunderClan and heal anycat who needed help. Boulderpaw's fresh scars on his right shoulder gleamed in the early sunlight, and his eyes were pained and desperate.

"Well we can't just sit here all day like bumps on a log," an old loner by the name of Bark grumbled. "Honest, when we got out of that hostage den, I thought this was actually going places. Now we just sit an' do nothing about out problems."

"That changes today." Pebblepaw spoke, surprised by the solemnity in her own voice.

The crowd didn't seem to be listening, and instead the cats' voices erupted into noises of confusion and concern. Pebblepaw lashed her tail across the grass, thinking fast. These cats needed some sort of direction. They needed a plan.

"How bad are things in RiverClan?" Pebblepaw lifted up her voice above the roar of the crowd.

She looked around, trying to see Carptuft in the crowd. He was a RiverClan cat, and she guessed that he would be head of paws to come to the meeting. Although, to her disappointment, it was the silver she-cat who spoke again.

"Bad. Last time I heard from my buddy Carptuft, they were practically huddled in their camp like scared rabbits. ThunderClan is encircling them from all sides. I've heard they're starving to death in their own camp!"

Pebblepaw exchanged an alarmed glance with Min, Thornpaw, and Batpaw. While they were all here, their clanmates were suffering. Pebblepaw had known it was bad, after all that's what they were all fighting for, but she had hoped that it wasn't *that* bad.

Pebblepaw blinked. "We'll talk to the other clans, and see if they can help us out," she mewed. "WindClan hopefully will still remember that we helped save their kits. Maybe ShadowClan will help too."

"Bad idea." Pebblepaw couldn't hear where the voice was coming from. "ShadowClan's just as bad, if not worse off than your precious RiverClan. There's greencough, and our territory is also being invaded by ThunderClan *and* WindClan."

"Trust ShadowClan to be entitled at a time like this," Batpaw muttered. The shadows in his eyes told Pebblepaw, though, that he was deeply unsettled.

Pebblepaw stood up straight, memories of the plan she had discussed previously with Min, flowing into her like a warm river full of freshkill. She raised her voice above the uneasy murmurings of the crowd.

"Listen, everyone! The time for silence and sulking is at an end. We will retaliate now!"

"How?" A young cat's inquisitive voice piped up.

"Yes, how?" That cat sounded as low-pitched as a lion.

Pebblepaw took a sharp inhale and breathed out again. Around her, all the cats' eyes gleamed with hope for the first time in moons. She blinked back at them, not letting too much hope glint in her eyes. Beside her Batpaw and Thornpaw straightened their shoulders and turned to Pebblepaw. Mack grinned at the crowd of cats before him. Min's comforting gaze rested on Pebblepaw, and Pebblepaw opened her jaws to speak.

"Here's the plan."

Pebblepaw bounded alongside Spike and Boulderpaw, the three cats on their way to WindClan territory. She had tried to convince the young ThunderClan apprentice not to come, but he had retaliated saying that their plan would hold more weight if three cats from three entirely separate walks of life went to WindClan with their

proposed idea.

Min, Mack and the WindClan warrior Silverfire had decided to go to ShadowClan. Silverfire was the WindClan cat who had been at the meeting, and had been cheering out for blood. Apparently, her and her littermate Hawkflight had been temporarily exiled from WindClan for one reason or another. Silverfire hadn't given the other cats time to say 'no,' before she had self-declared herself part of the ShadowClan patrol.

"It would have been nice to be going to this territory of rival cats with one of their own," Spike grumbled to Boulderpaw.

Pebblepaw, who had wandered ahead of the two cats, turned back to face them. "Remember, it would have been a terrible idea to let Hawkflight or Silverfire enter into territory they had been exiled from," she reminded him.

Spike shrugged his shoulders on exasperation. "Just seems a bit much, all this border tension, if you know what I mean," he admitted. "Like, everything is more complicated than it needs to be. This 'code of warrior' seems to cause a lot more problems than solve."

"At least Silverfire's friends with two of the ShadowClan cats," Pebblepaw offered. "Maybe she can be of help after all."

"Maybe," Spike mewed doubtfully. "But they probably are more like 'reckless partners in crime' than friends."

Boulderpaw blinked. "It... it feels wrong to be going through all this. What I mean," he added when Spike and Pebblepaw glanced at him in confusion, "is that everycat just seems to be doing tons of fighting right now. If you're ThunderClan, you're supposed to want to destroy the other clans. If you're from any of the other clans, you want to destroy ThunderClan."

Pebblepaw looked ahead, not responding. In fact, she had nothing to say to the young tom. He had pretty much summed up all of her thoughts. When Pebblepaw turned back though, there was something much darker in Boulderpaw's gaze as he stared out at the

horizon.

The cats had decided to go the long way to get to WindClan territory. This meant passing around ShadowClan, before reaching WindClan. Pebblepaw reflected that WindClan was the luckiest clan, having no border-sharing with ThunderClan.

Gradually, the intimidating pine trees, that looked ominous under the leaf-bare sun, turned to gently rolling hills. When she opened her jaws slightly, the fresh scent of WindClan drifted into Pebblepaw's scent glands. Pebblepaw inhaled deeply, relishing the scent of moor grass and glanced back to Boulderpaw and Spike. The two cats seemed to be in a discussion, murmuring quietly to one another.

Pebblepaw let herself fall back from the lead to listen to the two cats. "Where do you think you'll go after this whole thing is over?" Spike was mewing. "I mean... if it gets over and we're still here...?"

Boulderpaw looked away slightly. "Maybe somecat could make ThunderClan a better place," he mewed slowly. "It's my home. What about you?"

"Nowhere." Spike looked down at his paws. "I'm just gonna be staying with Mack. He's getting old, even if the mousebrain acts like a kit," purred ruefully.

"Guys?" Pebblepaw turned to the two cats, feeling uncomfortable to be breaking into their hushed conversation. "It's time to turn towards WindClan."

Boulderpaw looked down at the ground awkwardly, "er... WindClan, yes."

Pebblepaw stared at him. "You know you don't have to come, Boulderpaw."

The grey tom shook his head. "But I do," he mewed softly. "I have to just do it and get it done and over with."

Pebblepaw exchanged a bewildered glance with Spike, but neither cat said anything to Boulderpaw. Flicking her tail at the scent

markers, Pebblepaw set off in a trot. If she was being honest, she had no clue where WindClan camp was. If she was being even more honest, she didn't even know that much about WindClan cats. She just hoped that her saving Lavenderkit and Dewykit would help her plea for help.

Spike bounded up to her, and the two cats gazed at the horizon. They were within just a couple paw lengths of the border. Spike's stomach grumbled, and he looked uncomfortable. "There hasn't been much to eat lately," he put in hastily. "That's another thing. We'll not only have a larger enemy, but we'll also starve if we don't make our move soon."

Pebblepaw dipped her head. "No time to wait for patrol at the border," she agreed. "I don't think any of us could survive out here on the open moor come moon high."

She looked up at the sun, which was already on its way down the sky, and shivered. The wind was piercing up here, on the exposed moor land. The once lush green rolling hills were brown and withered, with dustings of white snow on some of the peaks. *StarClan no!* If the first snow had already come, then they were in for a terrible leafbare. Even if ThunderClan didn't kill them, this could. *We have to do this, and fast.*

Boulderpaw and Spike were standing beside her, motionless, their pelts fluffed up against the chill. Pebblepaw trembled. "We run," she mewed. "We run towards the scent markers as fast as we can."

Boulderpaw nodded, his eyes round. "It's like we're running toward the enemy."

Pebblepaw took off into a run, propelling her short grey legs as fast as she could. She had thought that everything she had endured would help, but since she hadn't been patrolling territory, she felt slow and lopsided. Beside her, Boulderpaw and Spike were also struggling, although their eyes were resolute.

Pebblepaw raced, side by side with the two toms along the barren wasteland. She wondered if leaf-bare was always this bad, with no prey in sight. She couldn't remember her first leaf-bare very well,

cozied up in a nest with Gorsefern and Moonlightheart. Her heart ached as she remembered the two nursery parents, who had been like her own parents when Spikewillow had practically abandoned her. She wondered how they were doing now, and if they were all alive.

WindClan had very scant resources, Pebblepaw realised as she gasped in frigid air. She had expected them to have plentiful and rich land, since they didn't have to constantly fight against ThunderClan's agressions, but they had external problems that seemed terrible.

Pebblepaw dodged around a rabbit, narrowly missing toppling over it. She looked back at the brown heap, wondering why it wasn't running away, then she realised that the rabbit was dead. It had probably starved to death.

Pebblepaw was gasping for breath as she forced her muscles to climb up a steep incline. She felt as though she had been running forever, and her eyes were growing fuzzy from the lack of air. With every pawstep, Pebblepaw feared that she would fall down and never get up again, like the rabbit. The only thing that kept her going was the sound of Boulderpaw and Spike behind her, their breath also ragged. They were three young cats, racing against time, and the inevitable war.

Pebblepaw pushed her muscles, seeing the top of the incline within sight. With one powerful stride, she leaped to the top of the slope. She continued pounding her paws, against the frigid earth. To her horror, when Pebblepaw looked down, she realised that the ground had fallen away from her. She felt herself plummeting, down, down, down, until she was rolling on hard brown earth. She tumbled to a jarring halt in a ditch.

Two shapes fell into her, knocking the breath out of her body. Pebblepaw took a few gasps of air that smelled extremely strongly of WindClan. She realised that the two shapes beside her were Boulderpaw and Spike, both of them also taking sharp inhales, desperately trying to refill their bodies with air.

Once Pebblepaw didn't feel like passing out, she opened her jaws

tentatively to taste the air. Instantaneously, the sharp smell of moor grass mixed with cats bathed her tongue. *Mousedung!* Pebblepaw remembered, shivering slightly, a time where she had fallen into ThunderClan territory and had nearly died. All those memories came back to her, as she opened her eyes to see a slender black she-cat with silver stripes standing over her.

Pebblepaw felt a tremor ripple all along her spine as the she-cat continued to stare at her with piercing teal eyes. Without swivelling her head around to look, Pebblepaw could sense that her, Boulderpaw, and Spike were surrounded by WindClan warriors.

Pebblepaw moved herself into a sitting position, wincing slightly, feeling her scraped legs. Her paw pads also blazed with pain, and Pebblepaw remembered the desperate running the three cats had gone through to get to here. The black and silver she-cat watched her every move with cold eyes, not speaking. Her teeth were bared in the beginnings of a snarl.

Pebblepaw sensed that Boulderpaw and Spike were also rising, stretching their legs tentatively. It was when Pebblepaw finally met the she-cat's intimidating glare that the WindClan cat finally spoke to her.

"What. Are. You. Doing. Here?" Every word the she-cat said through clenched teeth. "WindClan camp! Invaders!" she screeched. Pebblepaw winced away from the sound, but it seemed that all of WindClan was already out in the open, looking at the young cats with undisguised malice. "You're ThunderClan, right? We should kill all three of you right now!"

"Peace, Silvernight." A senior white tom pushed his way in front of the furious she-cat, his eyes deeply troubled. "Let the cats speak. I have, for all my moons of experience, learned, that it is best to talk before claws are shown," he mewed solemnly.

Pebblepaw dipped her head low to the tom. He spoke slowly, and his amber eyes seemed to have deep pools of knowledge within them. He was a white tom, with the classic WindClan build of tall, lanky, and being built for speed. The way he glanced at Pebblepaw sadly, though, revealed that this cat had seen many awful things in

his time, and his tail drooped as he looked at them.

"Well?" The tom prompted, staring at Pebblepaw. "You do have ThunderClan on you, but there's something more underneath that. Mingled scents of rogues, loners, kittypets, but more than that, RiverClan."

Pebblepaw dipped her head low to the tom. "Yes, you are wise," she mewed quietly. "I am Pebblepaw, formerly of RiverClan. Perhaps, some of you remember me and my friend Min rescuing two of your young kits.

The tom's eyes widened, and a gasp edied around the crowd. Pebblepaw couldn't surpress the opportunity to look around as the cats' eyes widened at their little group in shock and amazement.

Silvernight, in all her furiousness had mentioned 'WindClan camp,' and it seemed that Pebblepaw, Spike, and Boulderpaw had indeed all tumbled into the home of the moorland clan. Around Pebblepaw, there were almost a dozen cats, all of them wiry and well-muscled. Their eyes were dull, and most cats' ribs were protruding; leaf-bare had clearly already struck the heart of WindClan. The camp, from what Pebblepaw could see, must have been a very homey place in new-leaf. Dry lavender and moor grass had been woven around the camp. There were a few dens made out of alcoves in the cliff wall that Pebblepaw had stumbled down. A couple other dens had been woven out of tough moorland grass in an achingly familiar way to RiverClan's camp.

Pebblepaw had only been to one gathering, which had sort of been a failure on her part. She hadn't really met very many cats besides Mossypaws, who had scared her so much that she had gone into hiding for the remainder of the gathering. *I've grown so much since then...* This meant that she had no real clue who WindClan was, and whether their cats were friendly like RiverClan, or savage, like ThunderClan.

"Come with me," the white WindClan tom gestured with his tail to Pebblepaw and her friends gravely. "I suggest we talk in private."

Pebblepaw glanced back to see Spike urging Boulderpaw to his

paws. To her relief, neither cat looked too hurt besides minor scrapes and bruises. Boulderpaw's eyes were petrified, and the massive grey tom trembled as she looked at all the cats. Without Pebblepaw even flicking her tail at him, the massive grey tom stumbled rapidly after the WindClan cat. Pebblepaw exchanged a bewildered glance with Spike.

"What was that?"

Spike shrugged, picking up his pace to catch up with Boulderpaw. "Silver Sky knows," he mewed back to Pebblepaw. "Somethings up with Boulderpaw, though, and I'm not sure what."

Pebblepaw trailed after the white WindClan tom until they reached a den that had been woven together with thick moorland grasses. She blinked as the white tom stood at the entrance, beckoning with his tail.

"Come on," he mewed. "Breezestar will want to talk to you." As Pebblepaw got closer though, he mewed softly. "Don't alarm her too much, she's still recovering from... losing a life." He rushed out the last part.

As Pebblepaw padded into the den, she heard an irritated rasping voice. "Honestly, Warrenfrost, you've got no right to talk like I'm some frail elder. I've got nine lives to lose from the prey shortages, the rest of you cats only have one."

Pebblepaw found herself standing awkwardly inside of a small den that could probably only fit about five cats comfortably seated. Boulderpaw and Spike were blocking their way to seeing the clan leader, who was laying in a nest at the far end of the den.

"Sit," the she-cat leader rasped. "I don't want you freezing to death on my moors during the night, so let's get chatting!"

Boulderpaw and Spike backed away from the she-cat, and went to sit on the right side of the den. Pebblepaw brushed her paws against the soft, cold earth of the den, wondering where she should sit. She finally chose a spot close to Breezestar, and across from Boulderpaw and Spike. Warrenfrost also made his way into the den, and sat

regally at Breezestar's side.

"Our time is limited," Breezestar announced shortly. "I'm Breezestar, WindClan leader, this is my deputy, as well as my littermate, Warrenfrost," Breezestar flicked her tail to the white tom. "You three are cats seeking to stop a war, would I be correct?"

"Yes." Pebblepaw let out the word in an eager rush. Breezestar knew why they were here!

Breezestar shuffled her paws against the moss she was laying on, and forced herself into a seating position. She leaned her weight against Warrenfrost and lifted her chin to survey the young cats. She suddenly seemed so regal, and Pebblepaw instantly knew why cats would follow this elegant white she-cat.

"Pebblepaw."

"Hm?!" Pebblepaw lifted her gaze to meet Breezestar's fierce, yet tired look. Pebblepaw was shocked that the WindClan leader knew her name.

"You should know what you're getting into, kit. Wars like these... they don't end happily. I've lost so many-," she looked to Warrenfrost, her rigid gaze cracking for just a moment. "So many cats who followed me into battle without a second thought laying there... bloody and soulless. Gone. War changes you, changes the way you see the world."

Pebblepaw looked away, not knowing what to say. Her heart seemed to be breaking in two as she stared at Breezestar and Warrenfrost, their gazes sorrowful. In the end, it was Spike who spoke up next, in his quiet yet determined voice.

"I understand, and I am sorry that you feel this way about what we *have* to do," his gaze, which had been fixed on the ground suddenly sharpened, and his scorching gaze raked around at all the cats in the den. "But there is no turning back," he growled defiantly. "We have to fight this out, regardless of whether or not you support us." Pebblepaw opened her jaws, but Spike wasn't done. "The hostage den, where I was until recently, was a place where all of us cats

cowered like weaklings, afraid to stand up. Cats *died*."

Pebblepaw stared at Spike, and his gaze suddenly fixated on her, and he dipped his head. His eyes glinted with a silent thanks. Then, Spike turned back to all the cats. "I may be a former kittypet, as you clan cats seem to like to call me, but I won't back down from fighting. It would be worth it, to die, if it meant that the next generation of cats could live safely, in a world without this foxdung."

Spike fixed his gaze with Breezestar's fierce glare. He was significantly shorter than her, but he faced her look without any fear. Eventually, it was Breezestar who looked away.

"There is no right answer," Warrenfrost put in sadly. "I don't want to teach the next generation that the way to solve problems is to fight."

"We're not trying to have a war," Pebblepaw put in. "We plan to try *peace*, but I'm not naive. There will be a *fight*, and in the end ThunderClan has to lose, for us to live safely. We need you to meet us outside ThunderClan territory tomorrow"

Boulderpaw hadn't spoken until now, but he spoke up quietly. Pebblepaw wondered why the tom hadn't spoken earlier, since he had always seemed so talkative and spunky

"No, not all of ThunderClan is to blame."

Breezestar's eyes flickered with hostility. "Oh no? Because they were all such sweethearts when they attacked our camp a few moons back," she rasped. "They decide to follow Mightystar, they could always exile her, but they don't. They like being strong and feared." she growled. "They *killed* Springheart, and just in case you were wondering, she was the very heart of WindClan. Mine and Warrenfrost's littermate who had suffered like we had, but still faced each day with a smile."

Boulderpaw winced visibly from Breezestar's curt remark, as though the she-cat had dug her claws into his throat. He stared at Spike helplessly, and the black and white tom silently pushed himself

between Breezestar and Boulderpaw. Breezestar hadn't noticed, and instead her gaze was fixed on Pebblepaw.

"I suppose you want to know whether WindClan will support you," the WindClan leader mewed.

Pebblepaw glanced between Breezestar and Warrenfrost, wondering what they would say. Eventually, Breezestar let out a dejected sigh, her tail flicking to and fro in agitation. She turned to Warrenfrost. "You were always better at the sentimentals, can you explain?" She prompted her deputy.

Warrenfrost turned to Pebblepaw his eyes dark. "Apprentice," he mewed gently. "Springheart wasn't the only cat we lost these past few moons. Goldentuft, Beepaw, and Shadowthroat also joined StarClan's ranks, just to name a few who died of sickness and starvation recently. WindClan *does* want to help, but can't you see we aren-"

Spike, who was sitting in front of a trembling Boulderpaw, cut him off shortly. "Aren't you clans supposed to support each other? Help each other in the midst of turmoil? Can't you see that you're not the only one with losses. Can't you see that *warriors* are *dying?"*

Warrenfrost glanced at all the cats and sighed. "Look, I understand your grievances." He turned to Breezestar, who dipped her head resolutely. "What I was going to say was that we *will* come to this fight. With the cats we deem in sufficient health, but I will avoid losses from our cats at all costs."

Pebblepaw glanced at Spike, but he was looking down at Boulderpaw, a concerned look in his dark eyes. Turning back to Warrenfrost and Breezestar, Pebblepaw saw that they had dissolved into a quiet, yet tense discussion. Breezestar was slumping back down into her nest, and Warrenfrost murmured something in her ear. When the white tom turned back to Pebblepaw, his eyes gleamed.

"Are we done? I suppose we'll meet again tomorrow outside ThunderClan?" He prompted "The day is late."

Pebblepaw nodded, and saw that Breezestar had closed her eyes, and her breath was coming out in shallow rasps. Pebblepaw was amazed how strong this cat, who was clearly struggling, had been during their discussion.

Warrenfrost took the lead out of the den, followed by Pebblepaw. She glanced back inside the den to see Spike gently nudging Boulderpaw to his paws. Boulderpaw let out a gusty sigh as he turned to Spike.

"Why did I think this would help things," the grey tom muttered. "It's only made everything worse."

Spike's eyes glinted, and he turned to Boulderpaw. "It wasn't your fault."

What? Pebblepaw stared back at the two toms in confusion. *Why did Boulderpaw come if he was going to say nothing? And... Why does he look so desolate?*

Boulderpaw shook his head slightly. "I guess I just hoped that by coming here, I'd prove that I was one of the good guys. I'm not, though. Breezestar was right about one thing; ThunderClan does follow Mightystar because they like being strong."

"You're more than that," Spike mewed, but Boulderpaw just sighed resignedly, staring at the gradually darkening sky.

When Pebblepaw glanced up, horror made her pelt stand on end. The sun was already halfway down the sky! They would never make it all the way across the lake before the icy claws of leaf-bare got to them.

Warrenfrost turned to her, and dipped his head. "Could you tell Hawkflight and Silverfire to return, I assume they are with you?" He glanced towards the sky. "I also recommend you stay for the ni-"

The white tom's voice was cut off abruptly by a screech from Silvernight. Two other WindClan warriors were beside her, their fur fluffed up in hostility. Pebblepaw turned to see a large she-cat pinning Boulderpaw down to the ground, her teeth bared in a snarl.

"What are you doing Lilyfrost?" Warrenfrost bounded over to the other cats, and mewed shortly in the cat's ear. "He's ThunderClan, but he's a friend!"

Lilyfrost looked up at Warrenfrost, her eyes wet and furious. "I wasn't sure at first glance, but now I know it's *him."*

"Who?" The word eddied around the crowd of WindClan cats, who watched from the edges of camp in bewilderment.

Lilyfrost got off of Boulderpaw, but her eyes still blazed with fury. "I'm not wrong am I? You were the one who... who *killed* my *mate?"*

Boulderpaw stumbled back, and Spike pressed his shoulder gently against the tom. Boulderpaw's eyes were round. "I di- It was a mistake."

Lilyfrost turned away slowly, visibly trying to get control of her emotions. "Sorry for my outburst," she mewed to her clanmates through clenched teeth. "I just didn't want to *chat* with this... cat."

Boulderpaw looked away awkwardly, but it was Spike who stepped in. "It was a *fight,* cats die,*"* he meowed bluntly.

Every cat seemed to shift their paws awkwardly as they turned to Boulderpaw, it was eventually the ever-patient Warrenfrost who responded calmly, but coolly. "I see. This changes nothing regarding our alliance, I assume, and I appreciate your regret for killing my littermate," he finished awkwardly. "But, I think you should leave now."

"We will," Pebblepaw put in, at the same time that Silvernight's eyes glinted coldly. "But please, meet us tomorrow with all the cats you can."

"I recommend travelling swiftly, the moors are dangerous at night," Warrenfrost's nodded to the cats. "We appreciate everything you're trying to do."

This is so wrong! Pebblepaw glanced around at the circle of starving cats, feeling uneasy. *This should have been a heroic moment, but we're practically being exiled. And Boulderpaw...* Pebblepaw glanced at the

grey tom whose shoulder slumped, *he looks so defeated.*

Pebblepaw padded slowly toward the exit to the camp, Boulderpaw and Spike in pursuit, but before she could get too far, fur flashed across her vision.

"Pebblestar!" Dewykit raced up to her, his eyes eager. "You came back!" He mewed in a squeaky voice.

"Hey little guy," Pebblepaw nudged Dewykit affectionately, but her gaze was still fixed on Boulderpaw and Spike.

Dewykit glanced at where she was looking. "That guy's sad, isn't he?"

"... yeah."

Pebblepaw glanced back to see if the rest of WindClan was watching her. Warrenfrost was gently nudging all the cats back towards the other side of camp. Silvernight was resting her tail comfortingly on Lilyfrost, who was trembling.

Dewykit puffed out his chest and turned to Pebblepaw. "When I'm old like you," he announced brightly, "Imma find out how to make every cat less sad, like you. Imma be super Dewy! Cat who makes others smile and be happy!"

"You got a long way to go," Pebblepaw turned to see Lavenderkit rushing up to Dewykit and her eyes glinting as she saw Pebblepaw. Her voice was soft as she mewed, "thank you for everything."

Pebblepaw stared in amazement at Lavenderkit. The fearful scared kit had grown out of her kit fluff, and was now almost three quarters Pebblepaw's size, and looked so relaxed and happy.

Pebblepaw blinked as Lavenderkit wove around her, the she-kit's eyes round. "You'll be safe, won't you?"

"Of course," Pebblepaw sighed. "I should go now."

She glanced towards Lavenderkit and Dewykit once more, before following Boulderpaw and Spike into the sunset. The two

littermates purred and blinked at her happily. *This is what we're fighting for,* Pebblepaw thought. *For you guys, and your kits, and your kit's kits.*

Pebblepaw looked to the horizon, at Spike who was gently nudging Boulderpaw, and beyond that to ThunderClan territory, where Darkthunder was somewhere. She padded slowly away, her chin held high. *This is finally happening! It might not be perfect, but that's okay.* The last thing Pebblepaw heard from WindClan camp was Dewykit's happy, squeaky voice.

"You got this! Keep going and be awesome, Pebblestar!"

Chapter 28

Chapter 28

Darkthunder was padding at the head of a ThunderClan patrol, alongside Ravenfire, Smokeblaze, and Roachfrost the new warrior. Only a day had passed since Creampaw and Roachfrost's fight, but it had felt like a moon. First, Roachfrost had decided it was a great idea to give Darkthunder her lecture about the power and glory of Mightystar, then Nightjump had almost gotten caught carrying an unconscious Creampaw out of camp, cats had started theorising about where all the "apprentices" had "really" gotten off to, and the extra piece of freshkill on the pile was that Mightystar was finally ready to launch a deadly attack on RiverClan. *Hooray. My life is wonderful.*

Today, Darkthunder's patrol was going to scope out RiverClan territory for weak spots, and maybe snag a few other easily brainwashed cats (Mightystar had said that part like it was simple as telling a kit to play a game).

"I wonder where those two RiverClan Tinypelt-turned apprentices really got off to," Ravenfire was mewing to Smokeblaze.

Smokeblaze shrugged, snow crunching underpaw. *Right,* Darkthunder thought. *It's snowing too.*

Roachfrost glanced at Ravenfire and huffed irritably. "We've lost Thornpaw, Batpaw, Boulderpaw, *the other one,"* Roachfrost spat at the snow. "All the hostages, *and* Icefall is nowhere to be found. Also Nettlecaw, but we all know what befell him."

"At least we have Darkthunder," Ravenfire mewed. "That's something. Besides, the last patrol I went on to scout RiverClan showed that they hardly have any warriors to stock the fresh-kill pile and do patrols."

Darkthunder forcefully crunched her paws on the snow to blot out

the noise of her clanmates talking about RiverClan's destruction. She couldn't blot out Ravenfire's cynical voice, as much as she tried.

"Three dead. Basstail, Brightclaw, Silverbrook. I mean, they're so desperate they're sending the elders on solo patrols."

Roachfrost sniffed. "I wish we could have gotten more," she muttered. "But I get Mightystar's rationality. Better to do it all in one swoop then risk injury in little attacks. Get them scared to leave their own camp, then attack."

Darkthunder stiffened. *Stop going in circles,* she growled inwardly, thinking of Pebblepaw and her gang of cats, smiling while eating two-leg food. *We need to get this done soon, guys.*

"The fight's in four days, though," Ravenfire sighed. "It'll be good to finally not have to worry about RiverClan."

In the next four days! Darkthunder's shoulders suddenly stiffened, and she felt rigid as stone. She turned back to Ravenfire and Smokeblaze who were stomping along in the rapidly falling snow

"What?" She asked through clenched teeth. "four moon highs away?!"

Ravenfire looked at her in confusion and concern. "You missed that? Oh dear, Darkthunder."

It wasn't that Darkthunder had missed it, it was just that she had been trying not to think about it. The days in ThunderClan had begun to blur together, and everything had sort of reached a normal. *Well, in the way that it can, I guess.*

Now, as Darkthunder dredged through ThunderClan territory on her way to RiverClan, all her thoughts began to speed up and clatter together. She would have to pick a side. She would have to fight against some of the cats she had respected. She would probably watch her friends all die. *And all that foxdung's less than a quarter moon away...?*

The snow crunched under Darkthunder's paws as she was met with a steep ridge. Around her, there were only dry leafless sticks in the

ground, with no prey scent anywhere. When Darkthunder opened her jaws to taste the air, she was overwhelmed by the scent of ThunderClan that bathed her scent glands. She had sort of gotten used to it, yes, but it still sent a shiver coursing through her body.

"Why'd you stop?" Darkthunder nearly jumped out of her pelt as she heard a deep voice from behind her.

Darkthunder realised that she had stopped in her tracks, and that snow had already begun to cling to her pelt, turning in patchy white. She had been staring at a desolate tree, those memories flickering back to her. *Blood. Screech. ThunderClan.*

Her 'capture,' her attempted assassination of an anxious apprentice, her resentment about Nightpaw's death turning towards violence. Darkthunder pushed all of those confusing memories down deep, and turned to face the voice that had barked at her.

"What?" She snapped. "You're going to tell me it's *easy* to tramp in the *snow?"*

She whirled around to face Smokeblaze, the massive tom looming over her, and casting a shadow onto her. He stared at Ravenfire and Roachfrost who had already started their ascent up the steep hill and sighed. He fluffed up his grey-black pelt against the cold.

"You always did have thick fur," he mewed. "I guess the pebbles and boulders are close together?"

Darkthunder opened her jaws to speak. *What kind of cat says something as mousebrained as that.*

Smokeblaze's amber eyes widened imploringly, and he stared hard at Darkthunder. She bit back a sharp gasp of shock. *Does he mean?*

"Yeah, I guess. I'm not sure how thick my fur truly is, though."

With that, Darkthunder whirled around and raced after Ravenfire and Roachfrost. She felt Smokeblaze's eyes on her, but pretended not to notice. Inwardly, she was calculating the probability that Smokeblaze had been talking about Pebblepaw, Boulderpaw, and her loyalty to the two clans. She felt Smokeblaze's dark gaze on her

back, and wondered what his reservations and true loyalties were.

Darkthunder quickly finished the climb up the steep slope and met Ravenfire and Roachfrost. Together, the three cats padded deep into the heartland of RiverClan. Darkthunder passed through the camp, which had been long since deserted, and entered the training hollow, where she and Pebblepaw had physically fought for the first time, and the fox had shown up.

"Okay, we split up here."

Darkthunder knew she had to sound strong as she ordered Ravenfire and Roachfrost to go in the opposite direction as her and Smokeblaze. RiverClan scent was bathing her tongue now, which was a wonderfully nostalgic, but also rather horrifying thing to be experiencing.

She turned away from the two she-cats and padded down a slope towards a shallow tip of land that bordered a rocky shore. Smokeblaze padded after her, like a silent shadow. When Darkthunder tasted the air, to her surprise, there was very little RiverClan scent. In fact, the ThunderClan scent was about just as strong.

"They fear," she muttered under her breath.

It surprised her that Smokeblaze spoke from behind her, even though she probably should have anticipated it. "They fear us," he agreed, eyes glinting slightly. "Even if they see us, they ain't going to go after us. We could tramp in here like we own the place, and they wouldn't raise a paw."

Was that a note of regret Darkthunder heard in his voice? She pushed that thought down quickly. It would take a mousebrain to stay in a place where he disagreed with the morals of his group and cowardly hid away. Smokeblaze was often reclusive, yes, but he was anything from cowardly.

"Hey, look!" Darkthunder turned her head to the twisted reeds up ahead, feeling bewildered.

Her paws crackled on dry leaves and snow as she nodded toward the woven reeds in the distance. The only thing stopping her and Smokeblaze to getting to the land was the half-frozen lake. Pebbles and rocks crunched under paw as Darkthunder squinted at the dens. She remembered this part of RiverClan territory from when she was an apprentice. It was an island amidst a prey-poor piece of territory, on the very edge of RiverClan territory. On the other side of the island were the Wild Lands, where foxes, badgers, and rogues clustered innumerably.

Has RiverClan gotten so desperate that they have moved here?! Darkthunder tried to hide her shock. She had known that these patrols into RiverClan land had been going on practically since she had joined ThunderClan, but Mightystar had very wisely kept her newest cat off of them.

"Yeah." Smokeblaze turned to her slowly, his amber eyes glinting slightly.

Darkthunder stared at the massive tom whose paws were shifting slightly, and whose gaze was fixated on RiverClan camp. "What?" she asked.

Smokeblaze turned to her, and fixed his piercing gaze on her. "Go," he growled under his breath. "Go look at your broken clan."

Darkthunder stared at Smokeblaze, whose gaze had switched back to the dark pool of water. Ice lay on it, in a thin sheet so that if Darkthunder spread her weight across, she could likely make it across. As Smokeblaze silently stared ahead, Darkthunder only had one question in her mind; *why? Why do you want me to go?*

And yet, Darkthunder felt her paws moving over the rocks towards the ice. She found herself being fixated on the reed dens that lay in front of her. She felt no fear, only a desperate yearning in her chest, pulling her closer and closer.

Shleee! Darkthunder sliced her claws along the ice, instinctively checking for weak points. Her ears ringed at the sound, but her paws kept moving forward. Darkthunder stretched her weight out, and tried to get her paws as far away from each other as they could.

Her paw pads prickled at the sensation of ice digging into them, but Darkthunder kept going. While she travelled slowly across the thin sheet of ice, Darkthunder wondered where this desperate yearning to return to RiverClan was coming from. Not from Pebblepaw, not cocky Troutstar, Nightpaw was dead, and the yearning definitely did not come from Firbush. Darkthunder idly wondered where the dark brown tom and Icefall had gotten off to, before turning her gaze and thoughts back to the challenge at paw.

Darkthunder switched her gaze to the land that was now only a few tail lengths away. She squinted, and thought she saw a few cats on the shore. Darkthunder raised a forepaw, preparing to continue padding along, but that was when it happened, what she had been internally fearing.

Suddenly, the ice gave way under paw, and Darkthunder fell into a cold dark black pit of water and misery. Darkthunder took a sharp inhale of breath, but only water gurgled into her mouth, and she gagged, only letting more water in. Suffocating, Darkthunder thrashed out against the water, but her head only crashed into more ice, sending a searing pain throughout her body. Darkthunder's head felt curiously light, and her paws struggled less and less. Gradually, the dark iciness of the water disappeared, and Darkthunder was left floating in pitch black darkness. She gave out her struggle, and felt herself falling, down, down, down.

"Welcome."

Darkthunder heard a cold voice, but she could feel nothing, could see nothing. She gagged, her lungs spasming as she hacked for air. Darkthunder couldn't move, in fact she felt nothing she could move. Her mind felt slushy, as though there was nothing in it besides dark, black water.

Water! That seemed to bring all the memories back, faster and faster. Smokeblaze had told her to go and see her clan again. She had fallen through the ice. She had found herself falling... *Did I just drown?!*

Before Darkthunder had time to process that horrifying thought, the voice sounded again. *"I suppose you're wondering why you're here?"*

Darkthunder couldn't tell whether the voice was a tom or a she-cat, but gradually as she turned, a world came into view around her. A pitch black forest, the only light coming from lime green toadstools.

A cat padded toward her, their eyes gleaming with satisfaction. Darkthunder found her voice, and snarled. "Who are you, where am I?"

The cat smirked, and sighed. Their voice was thin and whithery *"All good questions."*

Behind them, Darkthunder saw three cats. Icefall, Brightshadow, and Earthquake. Icefall glowered at her with undisguised loathing and contempt. Brightshadow looked smug, and Earthquake looked bored. The cat at the head of all three of them seemed expressionless.

Darkthunder asked the question. "Is this the Dark Forest...? The Place of No Stars?"

The cat looked at her, and rolled their eyes. *"That place was demolished seasons ago so... good guess, but nope."*

"Looks evil enough to be it."

The cat padded closer, but Darkthunder's limbs still weren't working. *"I like it this way. We all have our styles, some like it dark, isn't that right,* Dark*thunder?"*

Darkthunder stared at the cat. "Why am I here?" she snarled, her voice as cold as ice. The cat turned to look back at the other cats, and it was Icefall who spoke up.

"Mousebrain. Cats like *us* don't belong with StarClan."

Darkthunder straightened her back. *I* am *different from you.* She glowered at all the cats, and found courage to speak. "I'm not one of you."

The cat spoke up, her eyes glinting. Darkthunder couldn't figure out what shade they were, or what their fur colour was. *"You are now."*

Darkthunder fixed her gaze coldly on them. "I'd rather not."

Was it just her imagination, or did one of Darkthunder's limbs feel less stiff...? She didn't have time to look now, but faced the strangers with a glowering expression on her face.

The cat stared at Darkthunder, *"You could win so much with us. Who really* likes *you anyway?"*

Darkthunder didn't care about the manipulation anymore, about the lies, the deception of all these older cats. She was going to live her life the way she wanted to. None of these Spirit Cats were ever going to control her, or control any clan cat ever again. She felt the last of the ice lift from her limbs, and sprang, claws outstretched onto the enemy cat.

Chapter 29

Chapter 29

Pebblepaw half-stumbled, half-ran alongside Boulderpaw and Spike. The snow had started to fall almost as soon as they'd left WindClan camp, and showed no sign of stopping. Her belly and muscles ached from exertion and lack of food, but she pushed on resolutely.

It had been made aware to all three of them that they weren't going to make it back to the camp before the snow had heightened, and the hard cold of the night set in. They also knew that going back to WindClan was not an option. The only option for survival was to head to ShadowClan, and hope their reception was less hostile.

Spike stumbled over a rock, and collapsed in a heap. The snow that fell on him rapidly made him almost look pure white. Boulderpaw instantly stopped running and raced over to him. When he nudged Spike and his friend didn't rouse, Pebblepaw's anxiety only heightened. She had no clue where they were, and Spike was a former kittypet, for StarClan's sake. He had never had any warrior training, and yet had ploughed ahead resolutely, even pushing Boulderpaw to keep going forward.

"Spike, buddy." Boulderpaw's mew was desperate as he nudged Spike. "You gotta keep going, we're so close now."

"Shuure we arre." Spike opened his eyes a crack and looked at Boulderpaw. "Diiid I evverr tell youu tha' youurrr both puurrrfecc?"

Boulderpaw desperately moved the rapidly falling snow off of Spike's back. He stank of fear scent. Pebblepaw instinctively looked around for a place where the three of them could shelter or get some sort of medical attention. She knew with a sinking feeling that their only option was to travel to ShadowClan, and then make another plan from there.

All this backtracking... What if a fight happens and I miss it? What if I

return and everyone is dead? What if we've already misjudged, and it's been a quarter moon?!

Pebblepaw stumbled blearily through ShadowClan territory, Boulderpaw following in behind. Pebblepaw turned back to look at the heavily-built grey tom, amid the shadows of night. His tail drooped, and muscles rippled as he carried a limp Spike on his back. The black and white splashed tom had yet to rouse since he had fallen into the cold, damp snow. As Pebblepaw looked up at him, she saw his ragged breathing. *When was the last time he ate? StarClan he looks thin...*

As Pebblepaw looked at Spike on Boulderpaw's back, Boulderpaw stiffened and lifted his head to look deep into her eyes. "What?"

His voice was almost wary, as though he expected her to snap at him. Deep lines of exhaustion creased his furry face, and his ears twitched toward her in curiosity.

Pebblepaw continued walking, and while she did, she stumbled into a towering pine tree. Snow showered her back, and Pebblepaw shook it off, trying to avoid splattering Boulderpaw and Spike with the nasty white stuff. She knew now why all of her clanmates dreaded leaf bare, with frigid temperatures and painful starvation.

Pebblepaw bounded after Boulderpaw who had stumbled a few paces forward. She wondered if he had even noticed her stumbling into the tree. Every part of the massive tom seemed to be set in a way that was rigid and tense. Pebblepaw tasted the air for ShadowClan, afraid that they might jump her since she was trespassing. Pebblepaw only hoped that she could find a friendly, helpful ShadowClan warrior soon, before it got even darker. Luckily, though, it seemed the snow had stopped.

Pebblepaw stared at Boulderpaw, as she caught up and began to match her pace with him. "What's wrong?" she asked the burly grey tom.

Boulderpaw stared down at her wordlessly, so Pebblepaw tried another approach, desperate to make him feel better. That's all she found she really wanted nowadays, for cats to be happy. When life

got hard, she had realised that friends and helping others were the most important things in the world. They were things not to ever take for granted.

"I know it's been hard. All of this, it isn't our fault. I understand if you want to step away from the problem..." her voice trailed away awkwardly.

Boulderpaw glanced at her, and then opened his jaws. "No, Pebblepaw it ain't that. Of course, I'll support you guys, since I want the world to get better. It's just... this," he rested his tail gently on Spike, who lay limply on his back. "Walking into ShadowClan territory while the real problem is in ThunderClan. I feel like it's all going too slow, and then sometimes too fast."

Pebblepaw glanced at Boulderpaw, feeling something else that weighed him down. "It's more than that, though, isn't it? Don't get me wrong, the war lays heavy on all us young cats" she added quickly when Boulderpaw opened his jaws to protest. "But, you've been so silent all trip, and WindClan..."

Pebblepaw slumped slightly. She didn't really know this cat. What did she know, really?

"I wish I was different," Boulderpaw admitted slowly.

Pebblepaw blinked at him, hoping she looked friendly and open. "You don't have to tell me," she offered. "I just want to help, if I can."

Boulderpaw blinked ruefully. "I wish we were really meeting each other in a different place. We might have been pals," he sighed.

Spike's body shifted slightly on Boulderpaw's back, and the grey tom stumbled slightly to get him back into a manageable position. Once steady, Boulderpaw shifted his gaze back to looking down at Pebblepaw.

"I wish I lived someplace different. I wish I looked different than I do. Thought differently."

Pebblepaw blinked. "Why?"

Boulderpaw's gaze glinted with grief. "Cats see me different 'cause I'm so big, and carry so much bulk, but they're half right. I-I killed Springheart. It was an accident, but I still did it. And I'm not clever."

Pebblepaw looked down at the ground as Boulderpaw spoke. Her paws scuffed fallen pine needles and pine cones, as she walked through the almost complete darkness. Boulderpaw was rigid, and he walked on swiftly.

"I've made big mistakes, too," she admitted. "It feels bad to live with that guilt, even worse to know that other cats resent you for it, too."

Boulderpaw looked at her, his amber eyes round in the gloom. Pebblepaw tasted the air for ShadowClan warriors, but still scented none.

"There was this cat in my clan," Pebblepaw began. "Nightpaw was his name. He was a fun-loving relaxed individual," she sighed, remembering all the times she had spent laughing and playing with him and Min as kits. "A fox came into our territory, more deadly than most. A massive, vengeful, scarred vixen. I think she was looking for a fight, like many who've been hurt themselves are."

She glanced up at Boulderpaw. His amber eyes, round and lost, stared down at her.

Pebblepaw continued. "We were all new 'paws at the time, so the mentors confined us to camp unless we were in massive patrols with other warriors," she explained. "I was an ambitious cat, and reckless too, even if I thought myself as perfect as StarClan in its entirety. I asked Nightpaw to go hunting with me, since I wanted to have him for a friend. Then the fox came-"

Boulderpaw stopped her with a chuff, and Pebblepaw glanced up at the tom in confusion. "Y-ou don't have to." His voice quavered slightly.

Pebblepaw shook her head. "I ran into the fox's den. *I* thought that I could get a friend that way, with recklessness. It was only when I reached the den, that I scented the fox. It lunged at me, and would have gotten me clean on the neck, but..." she felt her own legs

quivering. "Nightpaw pushed me out of the way, but took the fatal blow himself. Nothing any cat could do would've saved him. It surely would take a selfish, reckless mousebrain to kill her own clanmate."

Pebblepaw's legs seemed to spasm, and she let herself fall to the ground. She looked around for Boulderpaw, wondering if he was still plodding ahead. It took her a few moments to realise that he had crouched down beside her, his legs quivering just like her own.

"You don't have to feel that way, Pebblepaw," Boulderpaw mewed. "It was an accident, you were young and you made a mistake. All cats like a bit of adventure. You shouldn't be so hard on yourself. That guilt, it ain't healthy."

Pebblepaw stared at the ground for several moments. She whisked her tail on the cold, dark ground, and found herself touching Boulderpaw's own tail slightly. She glanced at him. *We just met, but we're talking about all this mousedung that happened to us. Why...* She saw Boulderpaw's gaze glint as he stared out at the forest. *Maybe it's* easier *because we don't know each other. Maybe, just maybe, it's because we both are suffocating under guilt.*

"You shouldn't be too hard on yourself, either, Boulderpaw." Pebblepaw turned to the tom. "These circumstances we're meeting under, they're hard...but you honestly seem like a fun cat."

Boulderpaw stared at her, "I want to live every day to make up for everything."

Pebblepaw's tail brushed slightly along the ground. "Me too."

It was strange to Pebblepaw, but after all that had just happened, she felt curiously lighter. She felt as though a weight that had sunk so deep she had almost forgotten about had suddenly lifted. Sure, not everything was sunshine and rainbows, and maybe it would never be. But for this moment, Pebblepaw found herself at a curious sort of peace. She was a former RiverClan apprentice, lying in ShadowClan territory with a ThunderClan tom, who was beside himself with guilt for killing a WindClan she-cat, but more than that she was just Pebblepaw, a cat who would do her best, no matter

what.

"Thanks, Peb. Can I call you that?" Boulderpaw's eyes glinted.

"It's what all my friends call me," Pebblepaw grinned.

It was right then and there that the ShadowClan warriors descended on them. True to their name, the cats launched themselves from out of the shadows. It was only when the warriors were upon them that Pebblepaw knew what was happening. Boulderpaw stank of fear scent, likely more for Spike than for himself, but Pebblepaw's chest felt curiously light, as though she needed to trust that these warriors would deal fairly with them.

Pebblepaw stumbled back in shock as a pale ginger tabby she-cat barreled into her, and knocked her onto her belly. The she-cat's claws were unsheathed, but Pebblepaw tried her best to calm her nerves and keep her own claws unsheathed, even as she felt the she-cat's claws digging into her claws. She did her best to get to her paws, but the ginger cat overpowered her easily with powerful, well-trained strength, and flipped her over. Pebblepaw felt her soft underbelly being exposed and tried to roll to the side or away. The she-cat's claws dug in, seemingly from all sides, and Pebblepaw knew there was no use in trying to fight her way out.

If she was being honest, being overpowered that easily by a well-trained warrior scared Pebblepaw. *If this was a real war, that she-cat could slice my belly open, and that would be that.* Pebblepaw shivered slightly, knowing that while her persuasion skills had increased with the former-hostage den cats, her fighting had not. She only hoped that the reckless young cats, alongside Min and Batpaw would be able to prepare the mis-matched rogues, loners, and kittypets for the war.

"Rogues!" The she-cat spat at Pebblepaw, her amber eyes blazing with fury.

Pebblepaw frantically looked around for Boulderpaw, and saw him standing his ground, teeth bared in a savagely defiant snarl, while he was being backed into a tree by two ShadowClan warriors. She squirmed, but to no avail. Pebblepaw could only watch as

Boulderpaw collapsed against the tree with a thud, with one of the ShadowClan cats, a young ginger tom, pummelling him to the ground.

"Stop!" Pebblepaw let out a screech, "please, we don't want a fight."

The pale ginger cat, which Pebblepaw could only scarcely make out the shape of in the gloom, looked on coldly, and cocked her head to one side. "What do you want then?" her tone was sharp, in a way that made her sound very no-nonsense.

Pebblepaw was thinking fast, and she knew that what she said now would impact whether she and Boulderpaw made it into ShadowClan camp, or were driven back out to the deathly cold and windy moor.

Pebblepaw was about to open her jaws, but her even tempered explanation was cut off by a white tom that had a very smug aura about him. "Let's just drive off the rogues, Yellowclaw. I don't see why there needs to be any preamble." He shot Pebblepaw an almost laughing look, and fluffed up his elegant white mane.

Pebblepaw felt Yellowclaw dig her claws deeper into her grey fur, which suggested this tom cat made the ginger she-cat feel very resentful. She found herself being hauled away by Yellowclaw towards Boulderpaw and Spike.

Yellowclaw's tone was measured. "Well, *Whitesun,* I think we should figure out what the strays were doing first. They seem to have a lost, starved look about them."

Boulderpaw let out a snarl, but the ginger tom that had pinned him down silenced him with a quick claw slash across Boulderpaw's muzzle. Pebblepaw saw blood dripping down. She looked at Boulderpaw until he met her imploring gaze, his eyes rounded, and he gave a slight dip of his head. *No fighting.*

"Huh. I bet they're kittypets who wanted to get a little taste of adventure," the white tom practically cackled out of his mind as though he had made the best joke ever.

"They must be out of their mind, coming here," Yellowclaw muttered, half to herself.

Pebblepaw stared at the two cats. They were acting as though she and Boulderpaw were inanimate objects or things that didn't have anything useful to say! Well, she was going to prove them wrong. Just because neither her nor Boulderpaw, nor Spike had ever passed a warrior assessment, it didn't mean they could be treated like the lesser. Like crowfood.

"I will tell you why we are here," Pebblepaw didn't let out a screech, merely raised her voice, and attempted to put an air of authority into it.

"Hm?" The white tom, Whitesun, glanced at her, trying to suppress a giggle, as though it was funny that she dared to talk to him in a straightforward manner.

"You may have received a few ambassadors carrying our mission," Pebblepaw stated the question like a fact. She continued on before either cat could speak up. "It is a matter of life and death, so we would rather not have much preamble."

She looked up at the ShadowClan warriors. The ginger tom who had been holding Boulderpaw down backed off of the grey ThunderClan apprentice, with an alarmed look on his face. Whitesun looked particularly taken aback, and Pebblepaw couldn't suppress a small grin. She looked up at Yellowclaw, and felt the ShadowClan she-cat's claws unsheath from her tail.

"Ivyspark, alert Woodstar." Yellowclaw didn't take her eyes off of Pebblepaw as she gave the order to the younger ginger tom.

Ivyspark backed away and raced into the shadows. Pebblepaw got to her paws within the gloom of the ShadowClan forest. She raced over to Boulderpaw and Spike, hoping they hadn't been hurt terribly. When she met Boulderpaw, he gave her a rye smile, blood dripping off his muzzle.

"Finally," he mewed ruefully. "I've been clawed by WindClan, RiverClan, ThunderClan, and now ShadowClan. Ain't that lovely."

"What's wrong with him?" Pebblepaw looked up to see Yellowclaw looming above her, silent as a shadow. She nodded to Spike.

Pebblepaw hesitated, "he has been overexerting himself."

"He's deeply unconscious." Yellowclaw's voice was sharp and straightforward.

Pebblepaw stared down at Spike, who was only letting out little breaths. She glanced back at Yellowclaw, "can you take us to your camp?" She heard the weariness in her own voice.

Yellowclaw nodded to Whitesun to pick up Spike. The bashful tom nodded, and slung Spike over his shoulders before turning away. "See ya, Yellowclaw!"

Yellowclaw didn't respond, merely nodded for Boulderpaw and Pebblepaw to follow her. They weaved around trees and bushes, all deeply shadowed. Once, Boulderpaw nearly fell into a massive bramble thicket, but Pebblepaw was able to haul him back. Yellowclaw only spoke once during their journey to ThunderClan territory.

"Don't sound too entitled," the cream tabby had turned back to Pebblepaw. "These cats want a leader that is like themselves, not high and *mighty*. Just be yourself, and you'll hold a lot of sway."

Pebblepaw had been taken aback by Yellowclaw's sudden advice. "I don't... leader, no, that's not me." She wasn't sure if the she-cat heard her or not, because at that point Yellowclaw picked up her pace.

They arrived in ShadowClan camp, which was a hollowed out clearing, surrounded over top by thick pine trees. Only little bits of moonlight shone through overhead in the dense clearing.

An old brown-orange tabby tom met them as they entered the camp, encircled by just over a dozen cats. He lifted his chin slightly as they entered, but his nervous eyes gave him a desperate appearance.

"Greetings." The old brown-orange tom spoke in a voice cracked

with age.

Pebblepaw took a few moments to look around and take in the warriors before responding. These cats had issues, but they weren't starving like WindClan was. Every single one of the cats had a scar on them, even down to the youngest cat, likely an apprentice. They all had a fierce appearance, yet slight movements like twitching tails and ears, and slumped shoulders revealed that they were all internally panicking.

"This is my clan in its entirety, from the youngest apprentice, to the oldest elder," the elderly tom said. "I lead a clan of sixteen, ever since Softglow left us, hardly after being promoted to Medicine Cat."

All of the cats dipped their heads to Woodstar, they were clearly a very strong and loyal unit of warriors. Every single one of the cats had massive scars crisscrossing their flanks, tattered ears, and missing limbs. Pebblepaw looked down awkwardly at her own scarred flanks, at the soft pink that parted her fur, which ran in three jagged lines down her right side, and various other jagged lines in parts of her fur. She remembered the immense pain, and the desolateness she had felt after her injury.

Pebblepaw couldn't suppress the question. "Who are you fighting?" she asked.

An older white she-cat with a missing tail snarled at Pebblepaw, amber eyes blazing, but the old tom, which Pebblepaw guessed was Woodstar, spoke up. "We're being pushed farther and farther into the Wild Lands," he murmured softly, eyes hollow. "Outside of clan territory, it's brutal. We're being pushed by foxes, and badgers on that side, not to mention ThunderClan and WindClan attacks."

A small grey and black tom with ginger splotches raced forward from amongst his clanmates. He stopped right in front of Pebblepaw, his stubby tail flicking to and fro in excitement. "Your friend's waking up," he announced jubilantly. "I've never seen anything like it... gave him a bit of juniper berry pulp, and he's rousing."

"Really?" Boulderpaw was practically jumping up and down at the ShadowClan tom's announcements.

"Come on! I'll show 'ya!" The grey, black, and ginger splotched tom raced back through the circle of cats, Boulderpaw bounding away in tow.

Pebblepaw returned her gaze back to Woodstar. "Our friends came to talk to you?" she asked hopefully.

Woodstar nodded slowly. "Yes, they came. They were quite tired when they arrived, so I've let them sleep for now."

"Do you understand our need for your help," Pebblepaw queried.

Woodstar stared at her, his eyes dull with grief. "I'll help," he murmured.

Pebblepaw stared at him. That reluctant response was anything but the affirmation she had been hoping for. Pebblepaw felt all of her unease begin to dribble in again. *Am I not trying hard enough to change the fate of this battle? I don't want a fight, yet it seems like I'm dragging more cats into a fight that will inevitably result in their death.*

It wasn't right then and there that Pebblepaw had the thought. It had been something that she had been unconsciously rolling over in her head. But now, standing in front of a mass of nervous, battle-scarred cats, the logic in her idea seemed to sharpen and intensify.

Pebblepaw opened her jaws to speak, and the words seemed to flow over her like a calming breeze. "We're not going to fight," she responded.

Immediately, Whitesun pushed his way aggressively to the front of the crowd, "we're *warriors,"* he snarled at her. "We fight to the *death."*

"Call me soft," Pebblepaw retorted at him, surprised at her own aggression. "But maybe I don't want to see all of my friends die in vain before my eyes. Call me mousebrained, but I think there's a way to find peace. Yes, it comes at a great cost, but it will be worth it."

"What is it?" The question seemed to ripple around the crowd of ShadowClan warriors.

Pebblepaw lifted her chin. It was finally going to happen, and peace *was* going to work, no matter what any other cat said.

"Meet me tomorrow night, just outside *ThunderClan* territory."

Chapter 30

Chapter 30

The mysterious cat dodged Darkthunder's blow just before she could land it, and rolled to the left. Darkthunder tumbled into a shadowy tree which seemed to transpire out of nowhere. She bit back a curse as she heaved herself to her paws, and a sharp blast of pain shot through her shoulder. *How do I get out of here?!* Darkthunder felt panic bubbling inside of her as the shadowy cat stared at her impassively.

Darkthunder tried to rear to charge at the shadowy figure, but instead she came face to face with Icefall. The pale grey she-cat looked almost crazed with fury as she leaped at Darkthunder with her claws outstretched. Darkthunder stumbled back a pace, slightly surprised by Icefall's fury.

"You're so much like her," Icefall's voice was raised in a high pitched screech. "So cocky. So arrogant. You both think you're so very clever."

She launched herself at Darkthunder, and the black she-cat had to fling herself away at the last moment, before Icefall's claws tore her to shreds. Panic mixed with pain from her injured shoulder blazed deep inside Darkthunder, and she whirled around to glower at Icefall, chin raised defiantly.

Icefall crouched low, as though preparing for an attack, and snarled at Darkthunder. Darkthunder narrowed her eyes to slits, trying to take in her shadowy forest surroundings. She noted the shadowy cat watching Icefall with serenity, whilst Brightshadow and Earthquake looked on almost curiously.

Darkthunder gazed coldly at Icefall. "You don't even know me," she retorted sharply.

Icefall's furious gaze turned to a more smug one. "I've seen you in

ThunderClan, kit. The way you talk back to others, the way you hold grudges, even the way you move around camp is exactly the same as *my daughter.*"

Darkthunder stared at her. Part of her wanted to laugh back at Icefall, wanted to attack her, just like Mightystar probably had. Instead, she took a sharp inhale of breath and turned to look at Icefall.

More than that, Darkthunder raised her gaze to all of the cats. To Brightshadow and Earthquake who'd started padding closer, and to the shadowy figure who sat, eyes unblinking, farther away from the fight.

"There is something that separates me from Mightystar," Darkthunder mewed calmly to all of the dead, vengeful spirits.

"And that is?" Icefall cocked her head to one side, still in an attack crouch.

"*I'm* going to fight to my last breath to make sure that cats like you don't get in charge of the world."

Darkthunder felt a sudden pull, a pull to go back, to fight for her life. Darkthunder closed her eyes, for just a moment. When she opened them again, she stared at all of the cats, but that was when she realised the mysterious cat had padded within a tail length of Darkthunder.

"Most of them are never going to trust you again. You'll always be alone." Their voice didn't trip with malice, or even disappointment, just deep certainty.

Darkthunder turned away from the cats. "Well," she huffed bitterly. "That's just the way it's going to be."

None of them tried to follow her as Darkthunder padded slowly away from them, into the gloom of the forest. She had no idea where she was going, all she knew was that she was leaving. *I've done it... they know I'm not their pet anymore.* Darkthunder held her head high, even amidst the gloom. She wasn't scared anymore, not

of anything.

Before darkness entirely claimed Darkthunder's mind, though, she heard the strange cat's voice, as though from a great distance away. It was soft, and solemn.

"*One day, they will come, and you will remember we offered you a forever home."*

Darkthunder didn't believe them anymore, even as the words sent a shiver down her spine. They were empty words. She was done with lies, and she was done with waiting around while the bad guys grew in power. She was as ready as she'd ever be to destroy Mightystar.

Darkthunder writhed on the ground, another spasm threatening to pull her deeper into the blackness that was swarming in her vision. Her eyes were blurred, she trembled with pain. *I can't breathe!* Darkthunder felt a paw massaging her flank, and she clawed at it feebly. Another wave of sharp pain moved through Darkthunder's trembling flank, and she wretched.

In Darkthunder's mind, water seemed to pour out of her jaws, turning the ground around her soggy and wet. She felt the steady paw on her flank, massaging her airways, forcing her to hack vile liquid up. It felt like air would never come to her lungs again, and yet Darkthunder continued fighting furiously. Even through her half-unconscious mind, she fought, knowing that she needed to survive.

"Done."

The paw lifted from Darkthunder, just as she heard a monotone voice from somewhere above her. She collapsed onto the peaty, muddy earth, gasping massive mouthfuls of air, as though each would be her last. Gradually, the pressure that had been on her head subsided, and Darkthunder blinked open her eyes.

An old raggedy tom with sharply protruding ribs stood over her, eyes cold and piercing. He fluffed up his white pelt, and looked at her with undisguised hatred through ice-blue eyes. Darkthunder

saw a trickle of blood running down the tom's left ear, and wondered if she had scratched the cat in her panic for air. Gradually, Darkthunder felt strength flow back into her limbs, and found the strength to get into a more respectable seated position.

Darkthunder dug her paws into the muddy earth that lay beneath her, not yet looking up to face her surroundings. She felt confidence radiating beneath her pelt as she remembered what had just happened, and where she had just been. *I defeated them! And, I survived.* Darkthunder drew back her lips in a grin, feeling freer than ever. She lifted up her head to face whatever new surroundings she had gotten into.

That was when she saw the cats. They were all clustered together at the top of a short, steep ridge, facing Darkthunder. What separated her from the cats was maybe ten or so tai lengths of peaty and rocky earth. Darkthunder felt every muscle in her body tighten from the tension that poured into her body when she looked at the cats. She recognised all of them. From the brown speckled tom at the head, to the russet grey she-cat to the fidgety tall white she-cat trying to press herself into the shrubbery. *Troutstar, Shimmerclaw, Snowflight.*

RiverClan?!

"You're surprised." A raspy voice spoke from behind Darkthunder.

She whirled around, momentarily turning her back on the cats. She found the white tom standing over her, his eyes emotionless and cold. He seemed to cast a shadow over her, and Darkthunder raised her chin fiercely.

"You're Frostbark," she snapped at him. "Old raggedy Medicine Cat of RiverClan who thought I was the evilest cat alive even as an apprentice."

Frostbark briefly looked over at the ridge where the cats stood. "You did try to kill Pebblepaw," he put in mildly. "Then you also joined ThunderClan, who want to murder us."

Darkthunder couldn't stop staring at the tom's mesmerising gaze.

"I've seen too much to get angry with you, Darkpaw," Frostbark put in. "My clanmates have that one covered. Although, I sensed you just then, revolting against *them.* My question to you is this, where do you go from here?"

His ice blue eyes seemed to stare into Darkthunder's very inner being, as though the cranky old Medicine Cat knew everything about her. The question he asked Darkthunder, she found oddly easy to reply to.

"I will be *me.* I won't use the words the spirit cats stuffed into my mouth. Nor the foxdung older warriors try to get me to believe just because they're older. No, I will fight *my* way, or die trying." Darkthunder spat the words out fiercely.

"Hm. That's a noble thought."

Darkthunder whirled around to see Troutstar glowering at her with eyes full of loathing and resentment beyond words. The first thing Darkthunder noticed was that she was taller than Troutstar, who seemed to have shrunk down with starvation and age.

"I don't need your validation," Darkthunder shot back.

"I wasn't giving it," Troutstar put in, in a mild tone that seemed to counter his unsheathed claws and fluffed up fur. "I don't give *validation* to cats who nearly destroy my clan."

Darkthunder didn't respond for a heartbeat, merely looked at all the starved and shaken cats who she had one looked up to and feared. They looked so much weaker than the clanmates she had once known, in fact, she felt like she scarcely knew any of them. Her distant yet caring mother, Lilactorm, was not among the cats, likely dead. Basstail, Brightclaw, and Silverbrook were nowhere to be seen as well.

Is it my fault? Darkthunder glanced at her clanmates, who seemed so enraged they couldn't find words to speak. Then she had another thought, *one ten or so moon cat 'destroyed' you?*

Darkthunder opened her jaws to speak, before the words even

formed a solid thought in her mind. "Foxdung, Troustar. One ten moon old kit on a rampage doesn't kill you. It's your flawed society and Mightystar exploitation of it, no cat else."

Troutstar seemed slightly taken aback by Darkthunder's sharp response. "You still contributed to it," he mumbled.

"So I did," Darkthunder raised her chin defiantly. "So now I fix it." She stopped for a moment, thinking. "No, now *we* fix it. Me, Pebblepaw, all the young cats and outsiders, banding together to fight, because no one else will."

Darkthunder stared at all the nervous, starving cats who had once been her clanmates. It wasn't their fault, either, for not stepping up to fight ThunderClan while it was a newly rising power, she knew that. This was a problem that ran generations, deeply rooted in their society, their Warrior Code. *A leader's word is the warrior code,* Darkthunder thought of all the rules she had had to recite as a young kit. *Borders must be marked daily, challenge all trespassing cats... Cats can easily exploit this foxdung.*

No cat seemed to speak, Darkthunder didn't blame them. She took their silence as a time to get to her paws, and shake the last of the ice cold water from her pelt. For a long time, it felt like no cat would speak, until a small high-pitched voice piped up.

"That's her, isn't it, Streamclaw? I thought she'd be biggest and scarierer."

Darkthunder turned to see a small pale brown speckled tom with green eyes rolling on the grass a little ways away from the other cats. She guessed it was Troutstar and Streamclaw's kit. He certainly seemed like a bold little thing. As Darkthunder watched, Streamclaw, an older pale blue tabby cat raced over to the rambunctious kit.

"Get back," she hissed uneasily to her kit. "Git away from here, kit!"

The little tom looked at her with round green eyes. "O-okay," he mewed ruefully.

The little tom stared at Streamclaw for a moment longer before padding away on unsteady paws back to the desolate camp. His tail was tucked in between his legs, and he looked back once at Darkthunder, his eyes sad and lonely. Inwardly, Darkthunder winced.

Streamclaw who was looking uneasily at the kit shot Troutstar a resentful glare. "Thrushkit's yours too," she muttered. "He looks exactly like you, so why don't you deal with it."

Troutstar unsheathed his claws and dug them deep into the ground. From where Darkthunder was, she heard the clan leader mutter under his breath. "Of all the cats who somehow aren't dead yet, you would have to be among them, Streamclaw."

Darkthunder turned back to Troutstar and narrowed her eyes slightly. She didn't know much about Streamclaw, the former loner who talked very little, but she knew that her and Troutstar had had a steady relationship ever since she had been kitted. It disturbed her greatly to see them fighting.

"Troutstar." Darkthunder focussed herself on the task at paw. "Your clan seems to be dying."

"Hm." Troutstar mewed stiffly, looking coldly at Darkthunder.

"The other guys, they're going to help you win. Pebblepaw, Thornpaw, Batpaw, they'll all return to you once the clans defeat ThunderClan." Darkthunder fixed her gaze on Moonlightheart and Gorsefern, Thornpaw and Batpaw's parents. She couldn't see Spikewillow, though.

Darkthunder took a deep breath. *It's time.* She knew it, she felt it. These cats needed to know so that they weren't surprised. "Mightystar's coming to kill you all. The other clans are coming to help you. Plus a bunch of other cats who see what's going on and want to help RiverClan out."

Troutstar seemed slightly taken aback, but he nodded slightly. "This could be a trap," his voice was slow.

"No." Darkthunder glowered at him. *Mousebrained excuse for a leader.*

Troutstar stared at her thoughtfully. "I'll talk to my Senior Warriors. In the meantime, Darkthunder, you will be our hostage, I think."

Darkthunder backed away, but Troutstar had already flicked his tail at two warriors, Mousefang and Carptuft. The starving cats moved disturbingly quickly, their paws seemed to scarcely touch the ground.

Darkthunder whirled, but it was too late. The two cats came crashing down on her, claws extended. She let out a savage screech as Carptuft dug his claws deep into her haunches, and began pummelling her belly.

The scent of rotten fish and wet fur bathed Darkthunder's mouth, bringing back all too many memories. She glowered at Troutstar from below Carptuft's fur and bone. "So you don't trust me," she spat.

His eyes were cold, his fur was fluffed up, his green eyes blazing with fury. "No, no I don't. Get her, and deal with her, Carptuft!"

Carptuft continued pummeling her, and Darkthunder clamped her jaws tight shut to stop a screech from exploding from her mouth. She tasted the sickly sweet scent of blood in the air, and realised that Carptuft had drawn a line of blood down her left back leg in all his fury. Darkthunder's hot anger and pain gave way to strength, and she pushed up into the air, launching Carptuft away.

The tom flew back several tail lengths, but landed on his paws, and bunched his muscles to spring again. And he would have, if not for the flash of white fur that blocked his way.

"Stop!" Darkthunder turned to see Frostbark glowering at all of his clanmates.

His tail was held straight up in the air, and he stood between Darkthunder and the rest of his clanmates. It was right then and there that Darkthunder realised that something was seriously wrong

with Frostbark.

He had *nothing* covering his body besides his own hide, and his breath came out raggedly. Still, the old tom held himself up to face Troutstar.

"You stop this now, Troutspeckle," Frostbark's voice was ice. "You are done with this nonsense."

Troutstar lifted his chin slightly to face Frostbark. "What?" he snapped at the elderly Medicine Cat.

Frostbark stared at Troutstar ferociously. "You heard me right, Trout*speckle,* I am done with the way you have treated the clan, our families. Ever since ThunderClan happened, you've changed. After Frogstar, you promised to be something *different.* You're failing everycat that *died* fighting for a better clan."

Troutstar lashed his tail to and fro, clearly annoyed by Frostbark.

Frostbatk glowered at Troutstar. "You blame this cat, hardly a year old, for the mistakes that you yourself have made in the past. You stayed back while others died for you." Frostbark's voice changed to a more gentle tone, although Darkthunder could hear him gasping for air. "No, my friend, don't get me wrong, I-I don't blame you. I just hope that you will-"

Frostbark's voice came out with a gasp, and he crumpled to the ground. Troutstar instantly rushed forward, nudging the Medicine Cat frantically. Frostbark stared at him. "My old friend." Frostbark's voice was barely audible, and his entire body was shivering. "You are good, just the way you are."

Troutstar backed away, fear scent radiating off of him. Darkthunder felt a tremor ripple down her flank as Frostbark tilted his gaze to meet her own wide eyes.

"It's almost over, Darkthunder. I know you already know this, but keep going, until your final breath." A shiver rippled along Frostbark, and he seemed to stare at her as though she wasn't there. "He still loves you."

The Frostbark twitched once more, before lying still. For a moment, Darkthunder could only stare blankly at the deceased Medicine Cat. Then his words seemed to register in her brain. *He... Nightpaw?!* Darkthunder stared up at the stars, wondering if Nightpaw was up there. Did he have a warrior name now, one that actually fit him? Darkthunder recalled that they also had two other littermates that had been dead before they opened their eyes. Were they watching her too?

Darkthunder's breath caught in her throat, and she forced herself to focus on the real world. She slowly lifted her gaze off of Frostbark's body. As much as he had always come off as cold to her, Darkthunder felt a pang in her chest that he was just gone...

Darkthunder looked up at Troutstar, whose eyes were wet. She rounded her eyes imploringly at him. Troutstar seemed to pull himself together for just a moment.

"Go," he ordered her. "Er... and thank you for trying, Darkpaw."

Darkthunder nodded tightly to her former leader and raced away, feeling tension coursing through her body. *It's almost time. Will Frostbark's death just be the first of many?*

Chapter 31

Chapter 31

Pebblepaw gazed at the crowd of cats from behind a thick bramble bush. Her heart was pumping loudly, making her ears ring. Her paws felt rooted to the ground, as nervous energy threatened to erupt in her chest. Soon, Pebblepaw would have to address these cats. she wasn't sure she would ever be ready.

Looking up at the sky, and the dying sunlight, Pebblepaw felt as though she should be more relaxed. The bright red and orange rays were fading now into calmer tones of deep purple and dark blue. Pebblepaw only wished she could be as peaceful and tranquil as the night sky.

"Peb?"

Pebblepaw jumped at the sound of a voice, her grey fur bushing up to practically double its usual height. Ever since the accident with Nightpaw, she had always been on edge, but now she felt even more paranoid. She felt as though she were suffocating.

"Peb? It's just me, just Min. You're okay?"

Turning, Pebblepaw saw Min's elegant and fluffy frame, with her piercing lilac eyes. Min padded closer and draped her tail on Pebblepaw's shoulders. Min's voice was soft and quiet, as though she was afraid Pebblepaw would disappear like mist.

"Yeah, It's just a lot." Pebblepaw heard her voice quaver on the last word. "Min, every day always seems like too much. Every single day, I always wake up feeling drained, and yet on high alert all at the same time."

Min's lilac eyes seemed to stare deep into Pebblepaw's soul. Pebblepaw felt comforted that her close friend was supporting her.

"I think that's what war and violence will do to any cat." Min raised her chin to the stars that were beginning to appear. "Let's make these last days count, so that our kits won't have to go through the same things."

Pebblepaw turned her gaze apprehensive towards the cats that were milling around, their tails twitching in agitation. She noticed Batpaw glancing at her and Min from the bramble thicket. He gave her a tight nod, and turned back to the crowd of cats.

Pebblepaw began to move away. "I should-"

"No, wait!" Pebblepaw heard the panic in Min's voice.

Pebblepaw touched her tail tip gently on the she-cat's broad shoulders. Pebblepaw was still amazed by how much Min had grown. She seemed so powerful, so strong, so much like a matured warrior, than the playful apprentice she had been when her apprenticeship had started. *We've all been alive for well over a year now. Now there are clever cats even younger than us.*

"Peb, this will be the last time we really *talk* before the fight. I want to make it count, you know?" Min's voice was quiet, yet it held so much weight.

Pebblepaw blinked, and wished she could have had a cheerful, playful remark to give back to Min. Instead, her voice grave, Pebblepaw mewed, "You're my best friend Min. I-I don't really know how I would have made it out without you. So thank you."

Min glanced at Pebblepaw. "You saved me too, you know? StarClan, I was ready to fight a pack of foxes, but you were the sole clanmate that came looking for me. Even though you were really going through it."

The brambles rustled, and Batpaw popped out a moment later. The grey and white tom licked his chest fur awkwardly, and turned to face Pebblepaw and Min. His troubled amber eyes and twitching tail told Pebblepaw all she needed to know, even before he spoke.

"ShadowClan's arrived. I... it's time."

Batpaw was gone before Pebblepaw could respond; he was in a jumpy mood as well. Pebblepaw turned to Min, and felt Min's face bury deep into her neck fur. She licked Min's ear, and nuzzled her best friend's cheek affectionately.

"Don't you dare die..." Min murmured, voice muffled by Pebblepaw's fur.

It was only for a few heartbeats that they were embraced, but it felt like all of eternity. When Min finally stepped back, Pebblepaw saw the wet streaks on her face.

Pebblepaw searched for words as she turned away, but none came. She turned back once, and saw Min following her, head held resolutely.

"Thank you," she whispered.

Min's eyes bore into Pebblepaw, as Pebblepaw went through the tunnel in the bramble thicket. Min's last words to her were, "I'll always be your friend, Peb."

Pebblepaw had never planned to live a life where she stood at the centre of a group of cats. She had never really wanted to. Although, deep down, she knew somecat had to step up, and it was going to be her.

Heart pounding, Pebblepaw pushed herself out of the bramble push. She fluffed up her pelt, shaking off a stray couple of leaves. Behind her, Pebblepaw felt Min padding out from behind her. She padded around to the front left side of the crowd of cats, silently offering her support.

Pebblepaw knew that she couldn't speak yet. She didn't trust her voice not to come out in a little squeak. Every other cat also seemed to be holding their breath, waiting for Pebblepaw to break the silence. Instead of panicking, Pebblepaw took a deep inhale of breath, and stared calmly at the sky.

There was not a cloud in the vast sky which seemed to stretch on for all of eternity. There were mainly hues of pale purple and deep

blue, which made Pebblepaw's fur lie flat. Only one star was in the sky, bright and blazing. It smiled down at all the cats, spreading its light. Blink! Pebblepaw narrowed her eyes as the star brightened. *Nightpaw give me strength,* she thought inwardly.

Pebblepaw forced all the strength into her limbs, her heart, her soul, that she had. She twisted the corners of her lip into a rueful smile, and lowered her chin to face the crowd of cats. *Can't hide forever.*

The mass of vibrating bodies seemed to stretch long into the horizon. All the cats seemed to be frozen, their eyes fixed on her. Only the occasional tail or ear twitch told Pebblepaw that they were even alive. There were so many different cats. Some were muscular, others scrawny. Some were sleek, others had ruffled, unkempt pelts. Some looked nervous, while others looked eager. Some were clan cats, but the rest were kittypets, loners, rogues, and others, all joined together because they wanted to help save this land.

Pebblepaw noticed that all the clan cats had pushed their way to the front. Even now, WindClan deputy Warrenfrost, disdainfully glanced at a heavily scarred small russet she-cat who was peeping between his white fur. The senior warriors were sitting at the front of the tight semi-circle of cats, as though they felt they solely had that right. Pebblepaw took this in within the time it took to blink one's eye three times.

Pebblepaw fixed her gaze on the collective group of cats. "Thank you for coming. We welcome you to the Paws United home."

A white ShadowClan tom tipped his head to one side, but other than that, Pebblepaw's response was met by silence. Her tail quivered, her paws tingled, and Pebblepaw felt the nerves seep in like snakes slithering into a dark cave.

"Paws United!"

"Yeah, Paws United!"

Pebblepaw turned to see Min lifting her voice to the sky, in a loud fierce caterwaul. Her other childhood friends, Batpaw, and

Thornpaw, took up the cheer as well. Pebblepaw saw Mack on the outer edge, lifting his voice triumphantly to the sky. Boulderpaw and Spike purred beside him in agreement, tails twined.

All the clan cats at the meeting looked at the cheering cats as if they were somehow crazy. The cheer was coming from the back of the crowd, and not at all from the front. The clan cats weren't cheering; they were silent as stone.

Pebblepaw waited for the cheering to subside before she continued again. She was glad that she had convinced Bark not to make her sit on a boulder like a presumptuous Senior Warrior. She was within a tail length of the clan cats, and wasn't in any way above them. It was them who had decided not to sit with her, and to instead listen to her desperate plea.

"Thanks guys," Pebblepaw murmured under her breath, feeling less stressed. In a louder voice, she cried out, "We all know why we are here. There is a nearby group who is persecuting the weak, and attempting a genocide of all those who do not bare the title of 'ThunderClan warrior.' We want to end their reign of terror, so that our kits won't have to live in fear."

Then came her first rebuke. Pebblepaw rooted her paws to the ground; she had anticipated this. "So what's with all the mange behind us? They supposed to like work under us or somethin'?"

Whitesun, a ShadowClan senior warrior glanced up at Pebblepaw haughtily, and continued his critique. "And why are you, a former *apprentice,* now a mange yourself, trying to get us to fight a battle on RiverClan's behalf."

Pebblepaw could feel bristling pelts. She guessed a few cats were unsheathing their claws, clearly insulted. None of them spoke up, though, as though they knew it was useless to fight against the 'superior' clan cats' views.

"Good questions," she said, trying to sound as polite as possible. Privately, Pebblepaw was deeply angered by the ignorance of the clan warrior. "I'll start by answering why we are fighting."

She glanced at Min, who nodded slightly, eyes round. "Don't think that you are all somehow above being *hurt* by ThunderClan, because you are not. No cat is invincible." Pebblepaw took a breath, and stared straight at the Senior Warrior. "ThunderClan won't stop with just RiverClan as their slaves, and believe me, that is what they will do with them. They won't even stop when all the clan cats are mere pawns for them."

Whitesun twitched an ear, as though not convinced. "Really?" he mewed sceptically.

"Have you not learned our history as a kit?" Pebblepaw asked plaintively. "The vast array of dictators that managed to get more than one clan under their paws. The spirit cats that literally *took over* the clans for season upon seasons, until an outsider saved them."

Pebblepaw glanced at him. "It's not even that, why non-clan cats are fighting for our sake, I mean; it's simply because they don't want to see any cat, kit or elder, die."

Whitesun looked at the ground, his dark eyes glistening slightly. As though too ashamed of himself to even speak up, he slunk away. The loners, rogues, kittypets, and others gave a wide berth for him to pad through.

"I think I should still address the question about the *'manges'* that stand before me," Pebblepaw mewed. "These are those who truly deserve the title of a cat; they come to *our* war because they want to. Because they want to create a better world on this land. They have a right, as much as we do, to be their own cat, not some *Tinypelt*." She used the slur that Mightystar had created.

"That lot really sounds like true warriors to me," Warrenfrost glanced at Pebblepaw approvingly.

"No! We ain't 'warriors!'" A raggedy russet she-cat by the name of Foxglove glared at Warrenfrost fiercely. "We're just ourselves, just cats. I don't need you giving me your own bias-filled label, whether it's 'mange,' *or* 'warrior!'"

Foxglove glanced at Pebblepaw and gave her a sideways smirk. She grinned a broken toothed grin, and Pebblepaw instantly knew what she was thinking. *'Got that one!'*

Warrenfrost glanced back at Foxglove uneasily. "S-sure," the elderly WindClan deputy mumbled. "Sorry, cat."

Foxglove gave him a broad grin and slapped him jovially on the shoulder. "It's Foxglove, Warrenfrost. Just plain old Foxglove."

Pebblepaw grinned at Foxglove's rebuke, but there was still work to be done. She knew the clan cats still viewed the strays as somehow inferior to them. Pebblepaw knew that this was a deep-rooted issue in the clan's society, and it couldn't be fixed in a day. She just hoped that her generation was taking steps to end the clans' supremacist views.

Warrenfrost glanced up at Pebblepaw, something kindling in the WindClan deputy's amber eyes. "Why don't you sit in front of me, Foxglove," he offered in a friendly tone.

Foxglove twitched her ears. "Maybe you could let Marigold and Rainbow in front of you," she mewed. "They're at the very, very back, and even though they're both quiet, they have some very smart opinions."

Warrenfrost backed off, nodding slightly. "Sure," he murmured.

A tom and a she-cat padded up to the front, and Warrenfrost gave his place to them. All around the clearing, the cats were mingling more, beginning to chat with one another. The ShadowClan warriors, once in a tight group of bristling pelts, now started to talk in low voices to nearby rogues, loners, and kittypets.

Pebblepaw took the moment of bubbly conversation amongst the cats to think over her intended speech. She practised it several times, instead of just winging it.

The group of cats were spreading out now, as though they were beginning to feel less rigid. Pebblepaw let out a faint smile of satisfaction, knowing that it was time to offer her suggestion to end

the war.

She took a deep breath, and raised her voice. "I want to tell you my plan to achieve peace amongst the clans with little to know bloodshed," Pebblepaw announced.

"How?" A ginger tom spoke up, his tail flicking to and fro nervously. "Aren't clan cats all about fighting? I mean, I-I guess it would be kind of ignorant of us to assume that there won't be a battle."

Pebblepaw was about to open her jaws to protest when a cream tom pushed his way to the front of the crowd. *Creampaw,* Pebblepaw recalled that he was a Tinypelt apprentice that had fled the clan. They had all expected him not to live once infection sank in, but Thornpaw had managed to save the young tom.

"You would be surprised by how many cats don't *really* support Mightystar. All the Tinypelt's don't, and are intending to fight on your side, for example." Creampaw glanced at Boulderpaw, as though asking for the other ThunderClan apprentice's support.

"Yeah!" Boulderpaw nodded his head emphatically. "I didn't realise how awful everything was until Darkthunder came and showed me. Now we can show the other ThunderClan warriors that Mightystar has been lying to them!"

I hope so, Pebblepaw thought sceptically.

"So, what's your plan?" The old ShadowClan leader glanced up at Pebblepaw, his eyes glinting with a look of hunger.

Pebblepaw took a deep breath. "The bulk of us congregate on the border between RiverClan and ThunderClan... wherever that is nowadays. We will have hidden our scent with mud so the ThunderClan warriors won't know we're all there. Basically we're all going to hide. A few cats will go to RiverClan and get all the cats willing to fight to also come to the border. Me and a few cats will meet the first ThunderClan patrol that comes our way."

Woodstar nodded his head. "Solid start," he agreed.

Nodding appreciatively, Pebblepaw continued. "Once the patrol

meets us, they'll likely instigate a fight. We can probably knock them out before they do much damage, but we'll avoid hurting them."

"Why not slit their throats. They're evil." A ShadowClan Senior Warrior named Snowshard was quick to rebuke Pebblepaw.

Pebblepaw grinded her teeth together in irritation. Had Snowshard not heard a word any other cat had said?

Luckily, a tom with a rainbow collar was quick to shoot her opinion down. "First, killing is bad," he mewed bitterly. "Second, we want peace, not more bloodshed.

Pebblepaw continued. "We can send one of the warriors back to camp, and ask them to retrieve Mightystar. Then we can try a peace summit. All going well, Mightystar will be horribly outnumbered, and will back down."

"Then what?" Pebblepaw heard a curious voice from the back of the crowd.

"Yeah, what happens when we defeat the mange?"

If we defeat them... Pebblepaw still wasn't confident in their chances. WindClan had brought Warrenfrost and three other malnourished warriors. ShadowClan hadn't done much better, bringing out Woodstar, Yellowclaw, and three others. The rest of the non-clan cats combined added up to about a dozen. Add her Min, Boulderpaw, Batpaw, Thornpaw, and maybe Darkthunder into the mix and they were around... *twenty five?* Not to mention the fact that even though Min, Batpaw, Thornpaw and the rogues had been teaching the loners and kittypets some fighting techniques, they still weren't really catching on, understandably not wanting to hurt a cat if it could be avoided. The difference between bloodshed and victory, if Mightystar decided to battle, was how many RiverClan cats were ready to fight.

Pebblepaw glanced at Woostar and Warrenfrost, but both toms had yet to answer the cat's question with regards to post-battle plans. She glanced at them both, who were looking sheepishly at their

paws, and spoke up.

"If we defeat ThunderClan we give sanctuary to the vulnerable. There are warriors among us who'd be willing to find them a better leader, and ensure that history doesn't repeat itself."

Since no cat spoke up, Pebblepaw assumed that that was a satisfactory answer. Either that or they didn't want to be chosen to live in ThunderClan while they were rebuilding. Pebblepaw didn't blame them.

Pebblepaw was about to open her jaws to close the meeting, when suddenly there was a rapid chasing of paws, and a rough voice came from behind her, in the shrubbery. Her heart pounded as a cat scrambled out of the shadows, eyes blazing with panic. Pebblepaw couldn't make out who it was in the shadows of the bramble thicket, but she very clearly heard the speaker's panic words.

"ThunderClan is attacking..." The voice wheezed out, gasping for breath. RiverClan right now! Mightystar got wind of your plan to rival her from a certain friend, sneaking around, and now her whole army is heading straight to RiverClan!"

Chapter 32

Chapter 32

Darkthunder was gasping for air by the time she reached the entrance to ThunderClan camp. Since Troutstar had let her go, Darkthunder had bolted back across the ice without thinking, and hadn't stopped running, even as she gasped painfully for air. Now she slowed as she neared the high bramble and thorn wall that encased ThunderClan.

She turned a bend to reach the tunnel entrance, her paws crunching on a brown leaf that had fallen from one of the now entirely leafless trees. She growled under her breath, knowing instinctively that a cat was going to jump out at her from around the bend.

"Out again, Darkthunder?"

Sure enough, Darkthunder's former mentor, Swiftclaw suddenly loomed above Darkthunder, her claws extended, tortoiseshell pelt fluffed up in extreme agitation. Her tail lashed the ground, as though permitting Darkthunder to respond.

"Yep, Swiftclaw. This time I fell into a freezing river because we thought we found RiverClan, and Smokeblaze wanted me to scout ahead. That's what you understand?"

To her relief, Swiftclaw retracted her long claws, and sat back. Still, her back remained tight and straight, her shoulders oddly tense, even for Swiftclaw. Darkthunder instantly knew something was wrong, even before she heard Swiftclaw's next words.

"A cat came to see Mightystar."

As though they hadn't even been talking about Mightystar at all, Swiftclaw began a whole new conversation. If nothing else rang warning bells in Darkthunder's head, that did. She glanced around as though expecting some cat to jump out of the bushes.

"He came with... a lot. I think you might want to meet him. Mightystar might want you to meet him. Orders..."

Swiftclaw's voice slurred together as though she had eaten poppy seeds. Her eyes seemed in an entirely different place. All Darkthunder could wonder was who stole the snappy warrior and replaced her with a moping snail.

The wind in the forest picked up to a roar, and Darkthunder couldn't shake off the apprehension and premonition that was coursing through her veins. She stared down at her paws for several heartbeats, forcing them not to tremble, even as leaf-bare chill probed into her damp pelt, and Swiftclaw's dull gaze was fixed on her.

"Are you okay?" Darkthunder managed to ask Swiftclaw.

Swiftclaw glowered at Darkthunder, picking up her air of authority. "Why wouldn't I be?" she snapped. "There's no reason to be. Not a single reason at all."

"She's right, you know. There's not a single reason to be worried at all."

Darkthunder couldn't move as she heard the sardonic voice. She watched the ground for several heartbeats, worrying that it would fall away entirely. Or, that she would fall off it entirely.

When nothing happened, Darkthunder levelled her gaze with Swiftclaw. For a few moments, Swiftclaw stared in the direction of the entrance to camp, where the voice had spoken, then her sharp gaze switched back to Darkthunder. Horror mixed with frustration and fury was smeared across Swiftclaw's face. She stared at Darkthunder, eyes blazing.

"You can't avoid me forever, you know? I get it, I get it." Darkthunder couldn't switch her gaze away from Swiftclaw as the tom's voice spoke again. "Try to kill someone and they tend to not want to talk to you."

Then Darkthunder's gaze turned slowly, as though she couldn't

control it anymore. It started by eyeing the ground around the speaker. The thorn-sharp unsheathed claws. The muscular brown legs, the scarred chest. The amber eyes which smirked with recognition.

"Firbush."

Darkthunder didn't give him the satisfaction of feeling terrified. She had faced an entire forest of evil and won. What challenge did her former mentor really bear for her? She smirked as annoyance flashed across her face. *Thought I'd be scared?*

"The meeting's starting, you too. Get going."

Firbush turned and headed back through the dark thorn barrier. Darkthunder stared at Swiftclaw for a few heartbeats. When she finally thought she could speak without gagging, Darkthunder asked the question that had been probing on her mind. "Why is he *here?"*

Swiftclaw, who was already beginning to pad through the thorn barrier and into the camp, glanced back at Darkthunder irritably. "Supposedly, he's been shadowing our former hostages, and has valuable information. He wants to join us, but if you ask me, he's an obnoxious RiverClan fox-heart who should die with the rest of his clan."

"Oh." Darkthunder echoed in response, but Swiftclaw was already gone.

Lousy furball. Darkthunder clenched her teeth, knowing all too well what was going to happen next. *I hope Pebblepaw's prepared. I hope she knows I'll fight beside her until my last breath.*

Turning, Dakthunder raced through the thorn tunnel, feeling fear race through her heart. She nearly fell into Swiftclaw who was padding, chin raised, towards Mightstar, and mumbled an apology. Darkthunder ran over to Roachfrost and the newly appointed Scarletpaw and sat down.

"RiverClan's time is at an end."

Darkthunder looked up as Mightystar began to speak. The pure

white she-cat was standing on top of a massive boulder, her small frame looming over all the cats. Mightystar shook her head ruefully as she spoke.

"I think we all realise that ThunderClan needs *more;* we're growing. It's a natural thing, for something to shrivel up and die. Just as it will be natural to eliminate RiverClan. And won't it be nice to be in charge of the cats strong enough to survive. They'll be ours. Maybe they'll even have cute little kits that we'll be able to control as easily as our own paws."

Darkthunder watched mesmerised as Mightystar spoke in her calm, soothing way. "Lovely little cats, my friends, my allies, tonight we fight."

"Why tonight?" A bewildered voice sounded from somewhere in the crowd. "I thought it was later on?"

Mightystar smiled with all her teeth, and flicked her tail for a cat to appear. Firbush bounded upwards, his eyes flicking over all the cats with such ambition, that Darkthunder felt her blood run cold.

"This is-" Mightystar began smoothly, only to be cut off by Firbush.

"I'm Firbush, formerly a RiverClan Senior Warrior, but I've chosen to join you all. I realised that the junk cats are getting all riled up to fight you tomorrow, so I thought we'd fight RiverClan tonight!"

Scarletpaw cocked her head. "Is he mad?" she asked.

Roachfrost, who had been eyeing Firbush nodded slightly. "Crazy and... brokenhearted, I think."

Darkthunder watched, feeling that the interaction between Mightystar and Firbush was strange. Surely Mightystar wanted Firbush dead just like she wanted Icefall dead. Surely Firbush wanted Mightystar dead?

She watched as the two cats outlined the battle plans for the night. They were to be moving as soon as possible. There was no time for prey, no time for rest.

Was Mightystar planning to kill Firbush, or did she want to see if he could become her ally? Darkthunder still felt confused as Mightystar nodded approvingly for Firbush to speak. It was subtle at first, but then Firbush's way of speaking toward Mightystar changed, and her like towards him vanished with it.

"Why are you fighting there?" he now hissed as Mightystar shot down his idea. She had spoken in a cold tone and slight smile to the clan. "Mousebrain!"

Mightystar flicked her ears up. "Did you just call me a mousebrain?" she asked with fake rounded eyes. "That's rather mean."

Either Firbush hadn't been around Mightystar enough to realise she was mad, or he was simply too gloated to care, Firbush chortled. "I bet this clan only follows you because you've got brawn from high ranks like Swiftclaw and Eagletalon to back you up. Watch."

Firbush launched himself at Mightystar, clearly intending to push her off the massive boulder, but Mightystar dodged in her eerily fast way, and Firbush fell off the boulder instead, and crumpled to the ground.

He lay on the ground, dazed for a moment. The clan was vibrating as though they all wanted to jump on him like a pack of rabid dogs. Darkthunder had always known Firbush was going to die, but she hadn't expected it to be in a way as mouse-brained and self-imposed as this. It had even been clear that Mightystar was giving her father a chance because they were kin!

Firbush hadn't taken it, because he had always seen cats as below him. Now he lay on the ground, trembling to get to his paws. Mightystar jumped off the rock, and waited beside him. Her claws were unsheathed. Firbush was going to die the way he had always seen others, squashed like a little bug by the tiny pure white she-cat he had abandoned, and nothing was going to stop it.

"Famous last words?" Mightystar asked, tilting her head to one side. "I asked mother the same question but she had none. She just growled until the end."

Firbush had gotten to his paws, and he now stood, facing Mightystar. Something had changed in his movements, and shen Darkthunder got a good look at his eyes, she realised that they were glinting with something like fear.

He backed away slightly and towards Darkthunder, Roachfrost, and Scarletpaw. The other two she-cats were backing away, as though giving Mightystar room to deal Firbush's final blow, but Darkthunder stood rooted to the ground.

Firbush was within just one tail length of Darkthunder when Mightystar pounced. This unfortunately meant that she saw everything within vivid clarity, in the sort of way that one would never forget.

Mightystar was an eagle on its descent, her body was flying at Firbush, so that he could hardly react. Only half a second later, father and daughter arrived together in an impact that sent Firbush crumpling to the soft earth. Mightystar didn't wait for Firbush to let out a grunt before she slashed her left paw down the length of his chest.

Blood began to pool out of Firbush's chest, but he seemingly did now have words to tell Mightystar. Gasping for air, Firbush murmured in a slurred voice, "See you soon in the Dark Forest."

Mightystar backed away as Firbush's blood ran darkly on the ground, like a massive tide of water. The tom's eyes were sightless now, and Mightystar was padding away, a grim look on her furry face.

She didn't stop walking as she made her way through the group of cats that had been watching her speech. They left a wide berth for her, and a few even bowed down in awe. Mightystar didn't stop walking in her brisk pace until she reached the exit to camp.

Mightystar smiled softly when she reached the entrance to camp, her eyes glinting in the gloom. "Let's show them," she purred, whisking her tail.

Immediately cats began to get to their paws; they were a silent

army. Roachfrost and Scarletpaw watched Mightystar as though transfixed, and began padding after her. Darkthunder couldn't help but be swept up in the tide of ThunderClan warriors, following them until they began filing out of the camp. It was only then that she turned back.

Firbush's corpse lay in the moonlight, which illuminated his rugged hide, matted with blood. Darkthunder stared, scrutinising him for several heartbeats. Firbush had changed from the calm, easily irritated warrior into *that.* Wind ruffled the top of his fur, making it blow in the wind. *He was my mentor...*

Darkthunder was glad he was gone, she wasn't going to lie about that, but something about Firbush's corpse could only remind Darkthunder of what could have been. If Nightpaw hadn't died, if she hadn't tried to murder Pebblepaw, if ThunderClan hadn't made aggression... how many cats would still be alive.

There was no use thinking about a world where only good happened, Darkthunder reflected to herself as she turned away from the deserted clearing. She only wondered how many of her friends would die... and who her friends really were.

Darkthunder followed at the tail end of the group, her ears pressed tight against her head to stop the cold from penetrating her skull. Throughout the journey, no cat had spoken; they had simply marched in a tight rigid formation. Even as the snow began to fall, the probing white stuff sticking to pelts, no cat slowed down.

It was only when Darkthunder got to the ridge that she stopped. Turning, Darkthunder saw that Mightystar was sitting on the ridge all by herself, wind ruffling her soft white fur. The rest of the patrol bounded up to meet her, and Mightystar flicked her ears for them to continue deeper into RiverClan land.

Darkthunder pressed herself against the vibrating pelts, not entirely wanting to talk to Mightystar. That dream was abruptly stopped when Mightystar yowled, "Darkthunder, to me!"

Foxdunged carrion. Darkthunder shoved at Snapfang, who was beside her. The tom collapsed into the snow, twitching nervously.

"S-sorry!" he mewed uneasily, getting to his paws.

Darkthunder inclined her head coldly, but her gaze was fixed on Mightystar and her deep blue eyes. She strutted up to the she-cat and shook the snow out of her pelt.

"Yeah. You wanted to see me?"

"I did."

Mightystar watched from her seated position as the last of the cats made their way down the slope. She smiled slightly as her gaze switched back to Darkthunder.

"Why don't you sit?" she asked. "Smokeblaze told the camp what happened; the word got around fast. It must be nice not to be lying dead at the bottom of a riverbed right now, hm?"

Darkthunder watched the Tinypelts trailing after the rest of the cats as they made their way around a bend and out of sight; she hoped they knew who they were fighting for. All the while, Mightystar smiled down at her clan.

"So, how was your time with Firbush?" Darkthunder awkwardly tried to get Mightystar talking, desperate to leave her.

Mightystar chuckled, not looking at Darkthunder. "He was as... lovely as you'd expect. Bid dark brown tom, very strong, very alpha, he really had the works." Mightystar smirked when she said the word *had.* "It's terribly ironic how, even after all these years, some cats still look back at the old system. Let's just say, he had his death spelled out for him."

Darkthunder watched Mightystar. "I guess."

Mightystar looked on at the shadowed horizon. "I trust you to do the right thing," she mewed. "RiverClan was the last clan to ever have the 'she-cat's can only be queens' rule abolished, did you know that? Before Troutstar, they had a leader who made all the she-cats work to mate with the strongest toms."

"What?" Darkthunder half-stammered half-spat.

Mightystar sighed. "I'm guessing Troutstar doesn't tell you that. It'll be a treat, really, killing that one. Then I'll kill all the Senior Warriors, a few others, and the rest we'll make ThunderClan Tinypelts."

"Do you trust me?" Darkthunder asked.

Mightystar abruptly switched her deep blue gaze; her eyes gleamed with a sort of rabid mad passion that chilled Darkthunder to the bone. The tips of her lips quivered into a smile.

"You don't," she laughed in her high-pitched voice. "I'm not crazy, I know you don't, but here's a little secret." Mightystar prodded Darkthunder's heart with a paw that had blood caked into it. "I believe in you."

Mightystar turned and chuckled softly. "It's funny when you know someone else more than yourself, but I've learned to read cats from a mile away."

"Of course," Darkthunder mumbled.

Mightystar's gaze was fixed towards the horizon. "It's time to change the world."

The small white she-cat smiled kindly and began to pad down the slope in a jaunty sort of manner. Darkthunder watched Mightystar as she purred loudly, and turned a bend.

For a while, Darkthunder simply stood, watching the leaves rustle in the trees, then she turned and made her way down the slope, following in Mightystar's exact pawsteps.

It's time.

Chapter 33

Chapter 33

Pebblepaw's heart pounded in her chest as she saw Darkthunder begin to bound away.

"Wait!" She called out plainfully, chest puffing for air.

The pure black she-cat turned back, eyes flashing with fear and anger. Her tail was curled up into a tight ball, and her eyes were round as though she had just seen a cat die.

"What do you want?" She hissed, then her eyes widened as she met Pebblepaw's desperate expression. "Pebblepaw?"

Pebblepaw could taste the ThunderClan scent, and her heart flipped over painfully in her chest, visions of the ThunderClan attack reeling in her mind. They had beaten the Paws United to RiverClan. Through the pounding of blood in her ears, Pebblepaw raised her chin defiantly to glare at Darkthunder.

"Why didn't you wait for the rest of us? Or even tell us about the fight?" Pebblepaw couldn't help letting the anger into her mew. "Is it really all for nothing? After everything, you still turn your back on us. After everything, you hardly even interact with your former friends."

Are they all dead already?!

Darkthunder was backing away, her tail flicking to and fro, eyes scanning the ground as though there was something interesting. "It's not like that," she muttered warily.

"Oh really?" Moons of love, moons of, moons of gradual growth, moons of living in a clan that really cared for her all shattered by one cat. Darkthunder.

After all the silence, all the putting everything into a box, or putting

all the guilt onto herself, now she finally let fury towards her former clanmate seep in like vile black liquid. At that moment, she even forgot about the battle at paw, blinded by a desperate sort of rage which permeated her body.

Darkthunder saw something click in her eyes, a change in her expression. "Haven't I helped you?" she muttered under her breath. "Giving Thornpaw and Batpaw little helpful tidbits about ThunderClan's strategy and course of action. Sure, we haven't seen each other since... you rescued me and Boulderpaw, but I thou-"

Pebblepaw silenced her with an irritated lash of her tail. "I can't believe it," she hissed. "I've been trying so hard. And I feel like it's all going to waste..."

Darkthunder took a step forward. Her green eyes glinted in the gloom, eerie in the blue and black hues of the night.

"I understa-" Darkthunder began, but Pebblepaw cut her off.

Pebblepaw felt her legs trembling, and her breath coming out in ragged gasps as she faced Darkthunder. "You don't," she mewed harshly. "I try to be upbeat and positive for everycat but inside... inside I feel like a wreck. I'm so furious, and yet so sad all at the same time."

Pebblepaw felt as vulnerable as a leaf in the wind. She found herself falling forward, and in a flash of black fur, Darkthunder caught her. They hadn't been this close since...

"You have a right to feel all those things," Darkthunder meowed fiercely, holding Pebblepaw up. "Honestly, I get it, well sort of. You're an empath, so you feel things others ignore. You have anxiety, depression, and a drive for success that is suffocating."

Pebblepaw let herself rest in the black fur, and felt Darkthunder's thick muscle underneath. Her former clanmate had grown, fierce and powerful. Yet, Pebblepaw was astonished by how Darkthunder could see things in her that she couldn't see in herself.

"It's hard being alone," Pebblepaw admitted.

There was a loud chuff from Darkthunder, and Pebblepaw saw the black she-cat turn her head around and fix Pebblepaw with a rueful glance. "You're not alone now," she said.

Pebblepaw thought of Min, Dewykit and her own mother, Spikewillow. She still was afraid that they might all die today, but it was true that there were cats who cared for her, even if cats like Spikewillow weren't among them. She twitched her ear, and backed off of Darkthunder. She felt something like warmth towards her clanmate.

"Thanks, Darkthunder."

Darkthunder stared at her. "No, thank *you,* Pebblepaw. For giving me a second chance even though StarClan itself probably won't." Darkthunder's eyes were dark with recent memory, and Pebblepaw wondered what she was meowing about. "I'll die for you, for any of your gang of misfits."

"Paws United," Pebblepaw corrected instantly. After a pause, she added, "they're all coming right now- do we have time before ThunderClan-"

"Probably." Darkthunder said the words with confidence. "That is, if you're Paws United cats are close behind you. They're still on the move"

Pebblepaw glanced behind, waiting to see if the bracken stems behind her and Darkthunder would swish. She knew she had bolted ahead of the group to scout out the area, but she hadn't realised how fast she had been moving. Darkthunder's eyes flashed as she watched the ground.

"You shouldn't be afraid," she glanced back at Pebblepaw, eyes dark.

Pebblepaw glanced at her. "I'm not afraid for me," she admitted. "I'm just afraid that we'll all die, and the next generation of cats will work for ThunderClan as their pawns, catching freshkill, and bowing to greater cats. Even beyond that, I simply don't want anyone to die."

Darkthunder smiled slightly. "Don't worry," she growled. "I'll make sure your allies and friends don't die. Not on my li-"

"Shut it!" Pebblepaw flicked a tail at Darkthunder, memories of when they were kits playing together on sunny days coming in. This cat had been someone she trusted for many moons. "You're my friend, too. Sure we'll still have a lot to deal with if... when we defeat Mightystar, but those days as kits don't suddenly go away."

Darkthunder growled. "We're all going to live. Not just us, but many ThunderClan cats are innocent, and deserve redemption too."

Pebblepaw flicked her ear, she could hear the sounds of bracken rustling as the cats made their way forward. She glanced back at Darkthunder.

"Yes, we're all going to live, or die fighting for what we believe to be right."

"When did you get all wise?" Darkthunder asked, nudging her shoulder.

Pebblepaw tensed briefly, then let out a purr. "Since when did you get wise too?" she mewed. After a brief pause, she sighed. "I guess we've lived a long time since we were RiverClan cats."

Darkthunder was about to open her jaws, but then the cats began to make their way up the slope. Pebblepaw was still astonished by how many there were, and how many she knew and loved. Batpaw and Thornpaw were padding together, the two littermates' tails intwined. Boulderpaw, Spike and Mack were leading the way alongside them. Then there was a mix of loners, rogues, and other clan cats, all joined together under a mutual cause. Then, at the back, nudging an old tom Pebblepaw recalled was Bark, was Min. Her eyes were bright as she joked with him, and encouraged him along.

"Pebblepaw!" Batpaw raced forward, his eyes bulging. "We scented ThunderClan," he mewed. He glanced at Darkthunder stiffly.

All the cats weaved their way around Pebblepaw, and she saw

Darkthunder's eyes widen in a mix of astonishment and excitement. "This is more than enough cats to rival ThunderClan," she mewed under her breath.

Pebblepaw glanced behind her. "I hope so, but we have to pick up the pace."

Darkthunder glanced at her, and then back at the ominous wintery forest behind them. It was dark and foreboding. "I can guide you there, if you trust me," she murmured.

"I do."

Pebblepaw was surprised at how quickly the words flew out of her mouth. She felt much less stressed now, after talking with Darkthunder. Now it felt as though the battle was too close to worry about it. They merely had to fight, and they had to fight now.

Darkthunder led the cats silently through reedbeds that stirred Pebblepaw's nostalgia. Her heart flipped over and the old memories of her territory, now merged with the alarming reality that she was walking towards a war.

The stillness that she had found herself in alongside Darkthunder was rapidly fading, internally and externally. A strong gust of wind sent snow blowing into Pebblepaw's face. She whisked it off, and glanced back at her friends. They were all trooping on valiantly, even as some cat got stuck in drifts of snow that hid rabbit tunnels.

"Almost there."

Pebblepaw glanced ahead, as Darkthunder nodded to her, sniffing the air. They were nearing an island of sorts, and Pebblepaw saw cats picking their way around silently and slowly. They all moved in an eerie sort of way, as though all their paws were controlled by the cat in front.

She felt her heart flip over. *They're almost at the spit of land where they can cross onto the peninsula!* She realised.

"That's where they are, isn't it? RiverClan, I mean?" Pebblepaw asked.

"Yeah."

Darkthunder's eyes were narrowed, and her head was tilted in thought. "Should we charge?" she asked.

Pebblepaw shook her head. "No, but we might be able to race around the other side, and meet them head on before they cross into RiverClan camp."

Darkthunder nodded and began weaving her way among the crowd of cats. Many reared back at her ThunderClan scent, but most had the decency to listen to what she said without recoiling. The word began to permeate the group, and eventually every cat knew of Pebblepaw's plan.

As though on a silent command, they began to run silently and stealthily. Pebblepaw raced among them, offering words of encouragement to any cat who seemed stressed or worried. They all pressed on, though, with determination. Darkthunder was running along the side, eyes narrowed, strong legs powering her to the front.

They made rapid time running around the small lake. Pebblepaw kept tabs on the movement of ThunderClan. It was going to be close. She hoped desperately that they would make it in time.

"Stop here!" Darkthunder hissed.

Pebblepaw reared back, and suddenly realised that if they kept going a few more tailengths, they would be out of their shadowed cover. She nodded to Darkthunder, and the rest of the cats stopped.

More cautious now, the cats spread out to form rigid lines. Pebblepaw saw the ThunderClan cats coming, and prepared to launch herself out at them. Darkthunder was beside her. Pebblepaw was about to flick the tail to give the order when Darkthunder stopped her.

"Thanks, for everything," she mewed.

Pebblepaw nodded, and flicked her tail.

Chapter 34

Chapter 34

Darkthunder felt her stomach flip over as the world around her descended into one of hissing and screeching cats. Now that everything was happening, Darkthinder was beginning to feel the fear that should have been in her from the start creeping in.

Thinking fast, Darkthunder propelled herself towards the ThunderClan cats. Around her cats hissed and snarled, batting at each other with unsheathed claws. Darkthunder saw Thornpaw in a tight lock with Scarletslash, a new ThunderClan warrior, while Boulderpaw leaped at his former denmate, Roachfrost, when she attacked Spike. He wasn't afraid to fight his former denmates if they got in the way of his friends. That was what Mightystar had expected of her, but Darkthunder wasn't going to fight on the white she-cat's side.

The world tasted of blood as Darkthunder forced her way through the cats. A paw sliced off the tip of her ear, but Darkthunder didn't see who did it amidst the fight.

She had to end this fast. Darkthunder searched for Mightystar, and saw her on top of a loner she recalled as Bark. He lay motionless in a pool of blood, twitching feebly.

As Darkthunder padded forward, she saw Mightystar's claws glint with scarlet-red blood. Bark's eyes filmed over, and with a sickening lurch, Darkthunder realised he was dead. *The first death of the war.*

Darkthunder barely had time to react before a couple of tussling cats slammed into her and she was knocked off balance. It was Redmoth, fighting Thornpaw and Batpaw. His eyes widened when he saw Darkthunder.

"Not a scratch on you!" He spat. "Help me finish these two 'Tinypelts' of yours off."

Without even thinking, Darkthunder launched herself onto Redmoth and slashed a claw across his face. She felt grim satisfaction when he whimpered and backed off. Darkthunder pinned him, and turned to Batpaw and Thornpaw.

"I've got him." She gasped as Redmoth tried to pummel her belly. "You two should make sure that ThunderClan doesn't get into RiverClan camp, and warn them of what was happening."

She thought she saw Batpaw nod, and Thornpaw mouth a thanks, but she wasn't sure. She dug her claws deeper into Redmoth's flank when one flailing forepaw ripped off a piece of chest fur.

Suddenly, claws dug into her shoulders, hauling Darkthunder off of Redmoth. The ginger and cream tom slunk away, and Darkthunder found herself face to face with the clan deputy, Eagletalon. She saw claw marks that ran down his side, although they were small.

"I always knew you were a traitor!" Eagletalon snarled furiously.

He aimed a blow meant for Darkthunder's throat, but she dodged neatly. Her paws skidded on something wet, and Darkthunder realised with a sickening lurch that it was blood, but thankfully not hers.

"Great job," Darkthunder spat. "You're so very smart."

Eagletalon gave her one last glowering look before he lifted his voice to the sky and yowled.

"Darkthunder is a traitor! Kill her!"

"Great StarClan," Darkthunder swore as suddenly ThunderClan warriors began to turn on her.

She felt claws dig into her tail, and turned to see Roachfrost trying to drag her to the ground. Darkthunder was about to turn, but some cat leaped on top of her. Suddenly, she collapsed to the ground.

A black shape moved rapidly towards her, and shoved the figure off of Darkthunder's back. She looked up to see a ThunderClan Tinypelt. His eyes were wild with fear, but he gave her a tight nod,

and turned away to fight seemingly on neither side. She watched him act like a fool and blunder into ThunderClan warriors, acting as though he was simply clumsy. *Guess that works,* Darkthunder thought.

Darkthunder saw Pebblepaw, and several ShadowClan warriors launching themselves at the ThunderClan warriors that were after her. Eventually, the number got more manageable, and Darkthunder twisted and turned, digging her claws into cats she had patrolled beside and eaten freshkill with after a long day's hunting.

She knew, though, that she had to find Mightystar before it was too late. Darkthunder looked around desperately, and then finally saw Mightystar. She, along with her Elite were making their way towards the island. For a brief moment, Darkthunder thought they were retreating, but then she realised that they were making their way to RiverClan camp.

The battle was pretty even, but Darkthunder knew that the element of surprise the Paws United had was rapidly wearing off.

"Elite!" She screeched. "Going to RiverClan camp.

She hoped that was enough.

All the cats suddenly jerked their heads around, and saw Mightystar and her elite. Several of them turned to follow her, both ThunderClan and Paws United cats. They either wanted to stop her, or join her.

"Go, go, go!" Pebblepaw was yowling, although her voice sounded pained as she issued the command.

Darkthunder watched cats pour after the grey she-cat, all of them following her, and trusting her with their lives. She too fell in line with the flow of cats, all running into RiverClan. ThunderClan would have the advantage now- the island was full of trees and thick undergrowth.

Darkthunder took one last glance back at the location of the first

actual battle she had fought in her life. Panicking, she saw at least the three motionless heaps of fur, and had to jerk her gaze away to stop herself from letting out a howl of grief.

Every part of her body throbbed with agony as she made her way into RiverClan camp. For a moment, every cat, ThunderClan and not alike stood together in a shocked trance. Darkthunder bounded forward to see what it was.

RiverClan cats, their pelts frayed and ribs protruding stood in a tight line, all of them ready for battle. Their dens were dull and unkempt, their freshkill pile only bearing the bones of long dead prey, but the eyes of the warriors were full of life. They were ready to fight. They were ready to win.

"RiverClan will never surrender!" Troutstar lifted his voice above the shocked yowls of cats. "We all go down *together*."

Mightystar broke away from the crowd. Her white pelt bore no scratches, only mud, as though she hadn't been fighting in the battle at all. Her whiskers twitched.

"Well," she purred. "Let's see what happens when I do *this!"*

Like a bolt of lightning, Mightystar was upon Troutstar. She scaled his body until she was on his head. From there, she leaped off of him, and twisted in midair. Troutstar, mesmerised, didn't even move as Mightystar dug her claws deep into his flank, and tore them through him.

"Get h-hher." Troutstar's voice was weak, as he crumpled to the ground, crimson blood showing on his soft fur.

Cats braced themselves for a fight, and the battle continued. Darkthunder saw Pebblepaw being toppled over, and saw the ranks of ThunderClan leap into battle at RiverClan. They were at a loss now, she realised.

The battle went on for several more heartbeats, cats mercilessly battling each other. Darkthunder ran towards Mightystar, her paws thrumming the ground.

Right beside her, she saw Forestcrunch launching himself at Iceleap. The old grey tom crashed to the ground, and Froestcrunch dug his claws into Iceleap's throat. Darkthunder turned away.

She found Mightystar, her eyes dark as she stood over Troutstar's body, like a snake poised to strike.

"He should be getting his next life soon," Mightystar meowed. "He'll want to fight for RiverClan, even though they're as good as ours. Just like some other cat I know, Darkthunder."

Darkthunder took a pace back as Mightystar's deep blue eyes met hers. She smiled eerily in the gloom, crimson red on her pure white pelt.

"Uh, I d-d"

Mightystar cut her off. "Don't think I didn't realise during the battle. Of course I knew you met with those... offshoots, but I thought you were stronger than that. I thought you were more like me."

Memories of the spirit cats telling the exact same lie to her flowed into Darkthunder's mind, but somehow, this was different. This was different because Mightystar was right.

"I thought you understood my mission," Mightystar's voice sounded genuinely pained. She looked up. "Eagletalon, get the one I want"

Darkthunder saw Eagletalon looming above her, claws outstretched. The massive tom turned away as Mightystar issued the command.

"Darkthunder," Mightystar's voice was sickly sweet. "I wanted you to be my deputy, to continue my mission. You still can, right now, in fact, just so long as you do one little thing for me."

Darkthunder listened to the screeches of battle. She should go back, she should fight, but something about Mightystar's eyes and expression made her stay put.

Troutstar twitched again, and Mightystar looked down at him, in an expression of annoyance. "Stupid tom!"

Darkthunder saw the claws of Mightystar extend once more, but suddenly a voice rang out from the battlefield.

"Stop!"

Pebblepaw! Darkthunder knew that voice anywhere. She turned to see Pebblepaw facing up to Eagletalon.

"I'll go willingly," Pebblepaw turned, and padded over to Mightystar.

Every cat stopped fighting, as though they knew how much gravity Pebblepaw had over the outcome of the battle.

Pebblepaw turned, and padded up to Mightystar. Eagletalon was right beside her, but Mightystar flicked her tail. "Hold onto the leader," she said, nodding to Troutstar. "I don't want him to fight."

Pebblepaw stared at Mightystar, and opened her jaws to speak.

"None of us want to fight you," Darkthunder realised that Pebblepaw had prepared some sort of speech. "I know it is our way to fight out our problems, but that way is wrong."

"What do you suggest as an alternative?"

Mightystar's voice was smooth, and Darkthunder hoped Pebblepaw could hear the mockery in it.

Pebblepaw stared at Mightystar. "What do you want," she asked. "What do you want out of this fight? Do you want power? To see cats you love die?"

Mightystar tilted her head to one side, and Darkthunder watched her with interest. Eventually, Mightystar said. "You have the makings of a fine leader, young cat. Let us talk then, in the *powerful* RiverClan leader's den. Darkthunder, come too."

Pebblepaw smiled faintly, and nodded to Mightystar. "You first," she offered.

As the three cats made their way to Mightystar's den, Darkthunder

turned to Pebblepaw and murmured in her ear.

"What was that all about?"

Pebblepaw glanced briefly at her. "Weird politics," she explained simply. "Leaders are all about them. It's sort of like a test of guts but with words."

Darkthunder felt soothed by the marshy ground underpaw, even as the injuries stung on the rest of her body. Pebblepaw looked quite worse for the wear, with scratches all over her body, and a particularly nasty one that parted her ear.

Turning back, Darkthunder saw all the cats in two distinct huddles. ThunderClan and the rest of them. All the cats seemed too tired to fight, and a few of them looked embarrassed or in pain.

Darkthunder took a deep breath, and made her way into Troutstar's den. Pebblepaw was beside her, and Mightystar was a little ways in front.

Once they got into the den, Darkthunder was disturbed by the protruding scent of rotting meat, and fleas. Pebblepaw wrinkled her nose briefly, before padding over to sit on the side of the den opposite to Mightystar. Darkthunder sat a little ways away from Pebblepaw, but still facing Mightystar.

"Well now," Mightystar let out an exhale of breath. "Now we can talk, just the three of us."

"Why the three of us?" Pebblepaw asked bluntly.

Mightystar sat down and began to lick the blood that had caked into her paws. She smiled slightly. "You two both are like younger versions of me," she purred. "For one, we're all she-cats who many cats look down on. For another, we all are resilient, proud, and willing to fight for what we believe in."

Pebblepaw stared at her. "So what is this *thing* that you believe so strongly in?"

Mightystar was still grooming her paws with gentle rasps. "I'm

changing what it means to be a warrior. I'm standing up for what I believe in."

Darkthunder saw something flash across Pebblepaw's face. She was akin to this emotion, but she had rarely ever seen it on Pebblepaw of all cats. Rage.

"You act like you're saving the world," she spat. "But the disgusting thing is that you're enforcing all your perceived threats onto every single cat you meet." Pebblepaw's eyes were furious. "Belittling others? Done. Reinforcing dozens of stereotypes? Done."

Darkthunder wasn't really sure what Pebblepaw was meowing about. She stared at her denmate in utter bewilderment as Pebblepaw went on.

"But Mightystar, you want to know the worst thing that you've done?" Pebblepaw's eyes were blazing. "You *destroyed* the lives of others without so much as a backwards glance."

Then, Mightystar looked up for the first time. Her deep blue eyes were fixed simultaneously on Pebblepaw and Darkpaw. Then she opened her jaws, and she purred.

"Smart cat."

Pebblepaw shook her head. "I really want to reason with you," her voice was low. "But I know that I can't now. Can I?"

Darkthunder stared at the ground, her paws numb. She felt sick, not because of the battle, but because of everything Pebblepaw was laying down for her. *Why didn't I fight sooner?*

She knew that time was up for Mightystar, Darkthunder was about to get into a crouch, when Mightystar spoke to her directly.

"Darkthunder? You can be my deputy now. You can have everything you ever dreamed of."

In a flash, Mightystar leaped onto Pebblepaw, in the same way she had done to countless other cats. Pebblepaw fell back onto the ground; helpless.

"We're bound together, you and I." Mightystar glanced at Darkthunder. "Help me change the world?"

Darkthunder stared at her, and felt a numbness creep into her body. "You want me to kill Pebblepaw."

Mightystar nodded. "You were very close last time, but sometimes parasites need a bit more force. A bit more... determination."

Darkthunder gazed at Mightystar, fixated on her eyes. She began to pad forward, one pawstep by another pawstep. Mightystar dug her claws into Pebblepaw's throat, and Darkthunder realised with a jolt that Mightystar was suffocating her.

"Deputy of ThunderClan, Darkthunder," Mightystar purred. "Has a nice ring to it?"

Pebblepaw twitched feebly.

Darkthunder smiled at her. "You know what else has a nice ring? Darkpaw, of the Paws United."

She launched herself at Mightystar, and shoved her off of Pebblepaw. Mightystar swung a blow at her, but Darkthunder dodged. She swung another blow, but Mightystar dodged it, and caught her in the side with razor sharp claws.

Darkthunder fell back, panting. She felt her body wanting to sink into the earth, to enter a long sleep. Liquid pooled down her legs, and Darkthunder fixed her gaze on Mightystar.

"This isn't my fight, it never was." The words came out slurred. "If it was, I could never win. But this is a fight to give rest to all the lives you took. This is a fight to save the future."

As Darkthunder readied herself for a blow, shapes swam across her gaze. Every cat Mightystar had directly, and indirectly killed. Many she didn't know.

A tortoiseshell apprentice, Icefall, Nettleclaw, a black elder, and many more. The last cat Darkthunder saw was Firbush. He gave her a passing nod, and his eyes held regret and sorrow.

Darkthunder bunched her muscles, and felt the power of all the cats beside her. The determination of the apprentice, the wisdom of the elder, the brute force of Nettleclaw, and the desperation of all of them.

Darkthunder swung one blow at Mightystar that came from everywhere at once. Her claws trailed deep into Mightystar, and she didn't stop until Mightystar collapsed in a lifeless heap on the ground.

Then, Darkthunder too felt the darkness claim her, and collapsed on top of Mightystar.

Chapter 35

Chapter 35

"StarClan no!"

Pebblepaw let out a harsh cry when she saw Darkpaw and Mightystar lying in a heap at the back of the den. The last thing she remembered was Mightystar's claws suffocating her, as Darkpaw stood over her, eyes terrified and furious.

Now they both lay at the edge of the den, blood still trickling out of their motionless bodies.

Pebblepaw raced outside of the den, letting out ragged breaths. What met her was honestly shocking.

Several ThunderClan warriors were talking and moving amongst the rest of the cats, offering remarks of guilt. Pebblepaw even saw Thornpaw treating the wounds of a small brown and cream ThunderClan tom. Other cats, like Eagletalon and his son Redmoth glowered out at the ThunderClan cats as though they were betraying ThunderClan.

"Pebblepaw!" Min rushed forward as soon as Pebblepaw stumbled out of the den. Eaglestar got to his forepaws.

"What are you doing out of there?" he growled, pacing towards Min and Pebblepaw.

Min glowered up at him, but said nothing. Her tail rested protectively on Pebblepaw's spine as Pebblepaw lifted her gaze to the massive dark brown tabby tom.

"I need help," she said in a rush. "They need a Medicine Cat."

Eaglestar's eyes widened, and he backed away, a look of discomfort on his face. "See to Troutstar," he growled to Redmoth. "She only has one life," he whispered. Pebblepaw guessed that the

ThunderClan deputy didn't realise she could hear him. "Mightystar didn't want StarClan's mingling because she saw them as betraying her. Larchbreeze was put there for that reason. He doesn't even go to moonpool meetings..."

Eaglestar's voice continued into nondescript mumbling, but he turned away slightly as though he didn't really want to deal with such delicate matters. Pebblepaw guessed that was because he was only promoted to deputy in the first place because he was strong, and intimidating.

"What is it?" Thornpaw was rushing forward now, Batpaw on her heels. They both looked tired and battered, but Pebblepaw felt her heart flip in her chest. *We lived through that battle.*

She glanced back at the motionless bodies, a RiverClan cat among them. Not every cat had that luxury.

"Pebblepaw!" Thornpaw's gaze was panicked. "What is it?"

Pebblepaw turned away from the cats and turned back towards the den. "Come with me," she whispered.

Batpaw and Min silently followed Thornpaw and Pebblepaw as the cats raced towards the battered den. Even now, the reek of blood hung over the air thickly. Pebblepaw glanced at Thornpaw.

"It's Darkpaw," she whispered.

The four cats all made their way into the den. Darkthunder looked even worse than when Pebblepaw had last seen her. She was merely slumped over Mightystar; motionless.

"No." Batpaw breathed out the word.

Thornpaw raced forward to look at Mightystar and Darkthunder. Min's face was pained, but she rested her tail tip on Batpaw's shoulder, which bled from a deep bite wound. Batpaw stared blankly ahead, his eyes dull.

"She looks so much like Nigh-"

"Don't say that," Min cut him off tartly. "She's just recovering from a hard battle. She just needs... a rest. Yes, that's it. A rest."

Batpaw slumped to the ground and Min sat beside him silently. Both cats had minor wounds; the worst injury was the bite on Batpaw's shoulder, while Min had a nicked ear and a nasty bite in her tail.

Pebblepaw looked at the little rocks that were on the den floor, and the blood that had come from Darkthunder. *I need to stop calling her that foxhearted name.* Darkpaw didn't deserve a name like Darkthunder. No cat did. She wasn't a ThunderClan warrior.

Pebblepaw padded towards Thornpaw, who was frantically checking Darkpaw for any signs of life. She padded towards Thornpaw.

"Can I help?"

"Maybe," Thornpaw said briskly. "I need you to help me get Darkpaw off of Mightystar and lay her down somewhere else."

Pebblepaw hesitated. "Does that mean she's-"

Thornpaw cut her off with a whisk of her tail. "I'm not sure," she admitted. "I know Mightystar isn't, though. She's stiff. Darkpaw... we need to lay her down for me to be sure."

Reluctantly, Pebblepaw pushed herself up against Darkpaw's shoulder. Thornpaw went on the other side, and the two cats worked to manoeuvre Darkpaw to the left corner of the den.

As they worked, Pebblepaw saw Darkpaw's wound, which stretched all the way down her side. She gasped, imagining how painful it was. Thornpaw twitched her tail to Pebblepaw, and the two cats gently laid Darkpaw down.

Pebblepaw felt sick as she watched Thornpaw run her paws along the motionless black heap. Darkpaw seemed so much like her brother had after the fox. It was so foxheartedly unfair, that after everything Darkpaw had gone through, all the lies, anger, and manipulation, her story would end here.

Thornpaw sat bold upright, and Pebblepaw turned to her. "Her pulse is there..." Thornpaw admitted almost reluctantly. "But it's very weak. We can only pray to StarClan that Darkpaw doesn't have the capacity to feel pain right now."

"Don't say that!" Pebblepaw exclaimed, and Thornpaw glanced at her.

"I never want a cat to feel pain," Thornpaw mewed simply. "I just don't see there's any way she can li-"

Pebblepaw was growing desperate now. "I nearly died- when Darkpaw fought me," she tried. "I was practically drifting into StarClan."

Thornpaw stared at her through tired eyes. "I'm sorry, Pebblepaw, but that was different. Your wounds were becoming infected. It wasn't one big wound like..." Thornpaw gestured her tail at Darkpaw's side. "This."

Pebblepaw glanced at Darkpaw, and realised that Min and Batpaw were coming closer, eyes hollow, gazes down.

"Is there anything we can do?" Min asked quietly.

Thornpaw stared at them sadly. "It may be too late for cobwebs," she mewed. "But we'll start there."

Pebblepaw felt panic flare up. "If I had known what to do sooner!" she exclaimed.

But Thornpaw shook her head, and nodded to Darkpaw's wound. "Most of the blood's already dried," she explained. "Also, this is a bid wound for cobwebs."

Batpaw raced out of the den, and Pebblepaw could hear him spreading the word that Mightystar was dead, and Darkpaw nearly so. She guessed he was rallying cats to get cobwebs.

A groan came from Pebblepaw's stomach, and she realised that she was starving. Pebblepaw felt angry at herself for feeling that way when Darkpaw was so badly injured.

"You know there is one thing you can do," Thornpaw mewed to Pebblepaw. "Talk to Darkpaw. Tell her what you need to tell her or what she needs to hear.

Pebblepaw blinked. "Does that really help?" she asked.

Thornpaw shrugged. "Maybe. You never know until you try."

Pebblepaw opened her jaws, and spoke the first thing that came to mind."Darkpaw... you're a good cat. Sure you might be a grumpy furball from time to time, but I don't mind. I," Pebblepaw fought to find the words. "I want you to know that there are cats who love you. Myself included. You're not alone."

Was that a ripple along Darkpaw's chest? Pebblepaw wasn't sure. Thornpaw blinked, and then turned to Pebblepaw. "She's fighting," the calico murmured.

Pebblepaw lifted her chin. "I'll find with her."

The rest of the night dragged on agonisingly slowly. Batpaw came back with cobwebs and several pieces of freshkill. Pebblepaw had gulped down the food, and only then realised how exhausted she was. Thornpaw had left to tend to the wounds of other cats, and Min and Batpaw had reluctantly gone with her, after Pebblepaw telling them they would be more use helping other cats. Cats that knew Darkpaw came in, even a few warriors among them.

Before long, the day had passed. Pebblepaw never left Darkpaw's side, even as the black warrior went between spells of seemingly getting better, and then seeming entirely motionless.

The rest of the Paws United, their mission complete gave thanks to Pebblepaw before many of them went their separate ways. Apparently, they had decided that every waning crescent, there would be a reunion of them, but all that fell on Pebblepaw's tired ears.

Occasionally, Min came in with news. ThunderClan had left, and Eagletalon had gone to the moonpool to receive his nine lives. He had vowed to work towards peace and had replaced two of the

dead elite with Smokeblaze and Ravenfire, two more neutral warriors in the Mightystar conflict. The Tinypelts had decided it was safer for them to remain in ThunderClan.

Min had also given Pebblepaw a list of those who had died. Swiftclaw, Cloudstorm, and Adderjaw of ThunderClan. Iceleap of RiverClan. Bark, Smoky, Day, and- Min's eyes had teared up at this name- Mack.

The last news was that RiverClan was starting to send healthy warriors back to the original camp to do border patrols and hunt prey. Several of the Paws United with no hom had decided to stay and help the injured at the temporary camp.

Now, it was night again. Pebblepaw glanced at the half-eaten sparrow that Mousefang had ducked in to give her. An entire day had passed, and Darkpaw was still unresponsive. Min had dribbled some water into her lips, though.

Gradually, exhaustion sunk in to Pebblepaw's limbs, and she found herself shutting out the entire world around her. She laid herself down on Darkpaw's side, listening to her irregular breathing. Pebblepaw found herself breathing in time with Darkpaw, in an odd desperation to bring her friend back to wakefulness, and the the world fell away from her.

When Pebblepaw blinked her eyes open, she realised that she was in a sunlit glade. The grass underneath her paws was warm and comforting, enveloping her. The landscape she was in was nothing like she had ever seen before. Stars twinkled around her, and Pebblepaw playfully nudged one of them, feeling content.

She blinked, and suddenly realised that another cat's sleeping form was beside her. The cat was curled up in a tight ball, as though they were simply exhausted. They looked so peaceful and at ease in the starry forest. Pebblepaw blinked. It was Darkpaw.

Suddenly, memories of Darkpaw lying limp stirred in Pebblepaw's chest. Darkpaw looked better now. Pebblepaw felt happiness stir in her chest, did that mean-?

Pebblepaw nudged Darkpaw with her shoulder. She listened, and heard sounds of prey nearby. The two of them could go for a hunt! Maybe that would help Darkpaw feel less stressed.

"Darkpaw! Come on, wake up!" Pebblepaw nudged Darkpaw's shoulder with her own. "Come on!"

She playfully shoved Darkpaw as the black she-cat let out a groan. Something about this place made Pebblepaw feel so happy and free. There was prey, there was soft grass, and there was her... clanmate? *Friend.*

Darkpaw let out a low groan as she glanced up at Pebblepaw through slitted eyes. "What happened?" her voice was slurred. "Where are we?"

Something in Darkpaw's eyes forced Pebblepaw to try to remember what had happened, and how she and Darkpaw had gotten to the nice little grassy clearing with stars. Her last memory was of curling up next to Darkpaw, their breathing matching. Suddenly, everything clicked in a bad way. Pebblepaw pushed her muzzle into Darkpaw's fur.

"What are you doing?" Darkpaw snapped.

Pebblepaw blinked uneasily. "I'm looking for stars."

With a sickening lurch, Pebblepaw saw the faint outline of stars along Darkpaw's frame, as though they were reaching out for her. Darkpaw stared at Pebblepaw in bewilderment.

"Stars?" She repeated. "Pebblepaw, what are you meowing about?" Darkpaw stared at her pelt, eyes narrowing in bewilderment when she too saw the faint outline of stars in places around her pelt.

Pebblepaw blinked. "Do you remember what happened?"

Darkpaw was on her paws now, and she looked at Pebblepaw straight on. "There was a battle," she began. "We fought. Mightystar called you and me into that den, and you tried to reason with her. "Then," Darkpaw's eyes widened. "She tried to get me to kill you. When I didn't, she attacked me. Suddenly there were... all these

spirit cats, helping me to deal the final blow to her. I killed Mightystar, didn't I? But what happened next...?"

Pebblepaw hesitated, because she saw the look of understanding dawn in Darkpaw's expression. To her surprise, there was no horror in her eyes, only the beginnings of acceptance.

"What are you doing here?" Darkpaw asked Pebblepaw fiercely. "You should be fine."

For a moment, Pebblepaw only gawked her jaws in bewilderment. "I needed to find you," she began. "I've been here before, sort of," she explained. "I guess it was pretty easy for me to come back."

"But then," Darkpaw tilted her head to one side. "Why aren't you able to go back?"

Pebblepaw blinked uneasily, when suddenly a solemn voice rang from behind her. "I think I can explain that."

Darkpaw's eyes suddenly widened, and her jaw gaped open. Pebblepaw swivelled her head around to see what had startled her so much. To her surprise, a cat she hadn't seen in moons came to meet her and Darkpaw. His eyes were dark, and yet Pebblepaw couldn't help feeling happiness spread throughout her at the sight of him.

"Nightpaw." Her and Darkpaw breathed the word out at the same time.

Nightpaw smiled sadly at them. His pelt was sleek and well-groomed, his amber eyes bright, unlike the last time Pebblepaw had seen him. Two other cats followed more hesitantly behind him.

Darkpaw bolted forward, and rubbed her jaw fiercely along her littermates' neck. He purred as she did, and Pebblepaw saw the two cats behind Nightpaw exchange a glance. Nightpaw ran his tail along Darkpaw's back, and the two weaved among each other, because they hadn't seen each other in moons.

After a long pause, Nightpaw's kind gaze fixed on Pebblepaw. "To answer your question about why you aren't returning, or why you're

even here at all, I'm not entirely sure. But," Nightpaw hesitated for a heartbeat. "You and Darkpaw have forged some sort of connection. Your desperation to see that she was alright brought you here, alongside the fact that you've been here before."

Pebblepaw had a feeling she understood, but Nightpaw continued. "It's easier to get to StarClan than it is to return." He glanced at Darkpaw. "I think the only way to get back is for the two of you to want it with all your heart."

Darkpaw stared at him. "Back?" she echoed. Her gaze turned to Pebblepaw. "I-I'm not sure if any cat wants me there," she admitted. "I don't think any cat likes me, bu-"

Pebblepaw cut her off. "We like you, Darkpaw. You saved every cat from Mightystar. You're a hero."

Nightpaw turned to Darkpaw, his eyes kind. "I know it seems nice here," he admitted. "And it is. But there's something special about growing up and growing old alongside your clanmates. You can only do that once. The things *we,"* Nightpaw glanced at the two cats behind him. "The things we would give to do that, alongside you."

Pebblepaw's eyes suddenly widened as she looked at the two cats behind Nightpaw. "The four of you are all littermates," she gasped.

"That's right," the she-cat, who was dark grey with lighter spotting, nodded. "You can call me Duskpaw, and," she nodded to the white tom. "He's Shinepaw."

Shinepaw nodded to Darkpaw, his eyes round. "You really should go back," he mewed fervently. "Then you can tell all of us what it's like to be a real RiverClan warrior."

Darkpaw blinked at all of them, as though suddenly realising that she had two littermates who were more than just dead kits. They were alive and growing in StarClan. Darkpaw swished her tail, determination lighting in her face.

"I'll fight," she promised. "I'll try to be a littermate you three can be proud of."

Darkpaw glanced at Pebblepaw and let out a half smile, as the two cats laid down on the grass. She pressed herself against Darkpaw, and nodded her thanks to Nightpaw

The stars around Darkpaw's fur began to fade, and Darkpaw's jaw suddenly clenched as though she was experiencing unimaginable agony. She fell to the ground with a gasp, and her body began to fade.

Pebblepaw nodded her thanks to Nightpaw, Shinepaw, and Duskpaw, before she faded alongside Darkpaw.

Chapter 36

Chapter 36

Darkpaw limped through the forest on the hunting patrol, her gaze held high. It had been a successful day's hunting, and she, Batpaw, and Pebblepaw had all caught more than enough prey to prove their worth as hunters.

The newleaf air warmed Darkpaw's pelt, and she smiled, genuinely happy. It was true that she and the rest of her apprentices had spent way longer as 'paws than they should have, but it was because Troutstar had told Darkpaw that she had to spend a full season as an apprentice to prove her worth.

It had been astonishing to learn that Thornpaw, Batpaw, and Pebblepaw also were willing to stay as apprentices, even though they had proved their loyalty again and again. Pebblepaw had even led a rebellion to save Troutstar's mousebrained pelt, for StarClan's sake!

The three moon apprenticeship hadn't really been about learning traditional hunting and fighting moves; it had been about all the cats reintegrating into RiverClan. It had certainly taken Darkpaw a while to get used to hunting alongside clanmates, and patrolling borders on the RiverClan side.

"Awesome catch, Darkpaw!" Darkpaw limped around to see Shimmerclaw grinning at her. "I'm sure you and your denmates are excited to be warriors."

Darkpaw smiled faintly. That was another thing. Troutstar had changed up the mentors. She had been given Shimmerclaw, Pebblepaw had unfortunately gotten Troutstar himself, Thornpaw had been working alongside Mossypaws for the past while, the two of them working through restocking RiverClan herbs. Min had gotten Spakmist this time, while Batpaw had Snowflight."

"Thanks, Shimmerclaw," Darkpaw mewed around the carp in her jaws.

Shimmerclaw bounded away, and Darkpaw was left to continue making her way back to camp. Her leg had never fully recovered from the attack with Mightystar after infection had seeped into it, so she had a permanent limp on her left leg. Surprisingly, that hadn't been the hardest thing for her to adjust to. She and Shimmerclaw had been trying various new techniques that helped her catch prey with her disability.

Then there was Pebblepaw. Darkpaw grinned as she thought of the cat she had grown close to over Troutstar's mousebrained apprenticeship exercise. The cat who had saved her life.

Min now led the Paws United, of which she had recently left to help cats struggling in the Wild Lands. Min had promised to return in the next season. She had left alongside Spike, Foxglove, Snowflake, and Boulderpaw and Creampaw who had renamed themselves Boulderfang and Creamsplash.

On the ThunderClan side of things, Eaglestar had become leader, and his son Redmoth had become deputy. There was still some speculation as to the motives of the new leader, but so far Eaglestar hadn't done anything particularly foxhearted. He was merely a complete fleapelted piece of carrion at the gatherings, which had started up again.

Mousefang had retired to the elder's den, but other than that things in RiverClan had remained quite stable. Though, Darkpaw had been noticing Shimmerclaw begin to show her age.

There was still a lot to take in, and it would be a long time coming before everything was entirely alright, but Darkpaw was beginning to feel content. There were still mental wounds on every cat that would take a long time to heal, and some that would leave lasting scars, but every cat was taking steps towards reconciliation.

With one last jump over a miniature stream, Darkpaw made her way into RiverClan camp.

It was different from the way it had been before Nightpaw's death. For one thing, the cats had begun decorating their dens with little shells and colourful bits of nature. For another thing, every cat had a new outlook on life.

Darkpaw watched as Troutstar and Streamclaw's kit, Thrushkit leap onto a leaf. He was just over five moons old now, and would soon be made an apprentice himself. She sighed as she made her way into camp, depositing the freshkill on the freshkill pile.

The sun shone brightly down on RiverClan camp, illuminating the sleek fur of every cat, and making the dark flesh of scars stand out. Darkpaw rubbed her cheek, where Mightystar's claws had forever scarred her the first day she had been in ThunderClan. Then, she glanced down at the length of claws that ran down her left side, ending at the base of her left leg. Oddly enough, those physical scars didn't cut nearly as deep as the mental scars that Mightystar had inflicted on her. She still often woke up in her den in a hot sweat with the painful memories of the past.

"Hey Darkpaw, there you are!" Darkpaw turned to see Pebblepaw bounding towards her, eyes bright. "Troutstar's about to call the meeting! Do you want to come sit with Thornriver and Batpaw and me?"

Thornriver had only received her Medicine Cat name last moonhigh at the moonpool.

"Fine." Darkthunder said, more sharply than she meant.

Pebblepaw twitched her tail. "Are you okay?" she asked quietly.

Darkpaw sighed. "I guess I'm just feeling a bit nostalgic," she admitted. "I mean we're over one year and three moons into our life, and it's just so weird how *normal* everything is becoming." Darkpaw hesitated. "I always looked forward to this day when I was younger, but now it just feels weird. I mean, I was already a warrior once, and I have three littermates who never even get to be warriors..."

Pebblepaw touched Darkpaw on the shoulder. "Normal is nice," she

said. "Sure it's a big change, but we'll get used to it."

Darkpaw glanced at her. "I know," she admitted. "It's just weird... after everything we've been through." She hesitated. "I know you're missing Min, too."

Pebblepaw nodded. "But she's doing a good thing, and I'll see her again soon."

The two she-cats made their way to the front of the crowd, and Darkpaw nodded to Batpaw and Thornpaw. Troutstar was already standing before the crowd of cats, right beside the river.

The river where those crazy Flame Trials everycat forgot about happened. The river where I nearly drowned but Firbush saved my life.

Darkpaw let out a purr as she remembered the days she had just called 'normal.' Perhaps life in RiverClan wouldn't be quite so boring after all. It was just a change. She switched her gaze to Troutstar who was beginning what would probably be a ridiculously long and boring speech. *Pebblepaw made such a better leader than him,* Darkpaw thought to herself wryly as Troutstar droned on about clan life and loyalty.

"Pebblepaw, step forward." Darkpaw suddenly fixed all her attention on Pebblepaw as Troutstar called her denmate forward.

Pebblepaw padded forward with confidence. She was no longer the quiet yet obnoxious cat she was when she started her apprenticeship. She was an empathetic and smart cat with a lot of valuable traits to give to her clan.

"Pebblepaw," Troustar began. "Is it a wish to serve as a warrior of RiverClan? To defend it and its warriors even at the cost of your life?"

Pebblepaw nodded. "It is."

Troutstar's eyes beamed as he said the next words to his kin. "Then from this day forward, you shall be known as *Pebblesplash.* For, like a Pebble splashing into a river, you began your apprenticeship, but like a splash that causes ripples, you have changed the lives of us

all. StarClan honours your bravery and intelligence, and welcomes you as a full warrior of RiverClan."

Troutstar touched noses with Pebblepaw, and Pebblepaw purred in thanks.

Next Troutstar called Thornriver forward and officially recognized her as RiverClan's Medicine Cat. Then it was Batpaw's turn. Troutstar named him Batwing, and cited his diligence and selflessness during the ceremony.

"Darkpaw, step forward."

Darkpaw took a deep breath as she limped up to Troutstar. He watched her carefully as she made her way up to him, as though he still was wary of her. She stood directly in front of him, and stared squarely in his eyes fiercely.

Instead of beginning with the formal words, Troutstar dipped his head briefly to Darkpaw. "I will trust you, if you trust me," he meowed quietly.

Darkpaw nodded. "I will trust you, so long as you prove trustworthy."

Troutstar opened his jaws to speak. "Darkpaw, is it your wish to serve as a warrior of RiverClan? To serve this truly noble clan, and its warriors, even at the cost of your own life?"

"Forever," Darkpaw turned and dipped her head low to the clanmates around her. "Forever and always."

Troutstar stared deep into Darkpaw's eyes. "Then, from this day forward, you will be known as Darkstorm. For, like a storm, you fight for what you believe in. StarClan honours your resilience and determination."

Darkstorm sat down beside Pebblesplash, Thornriver, and Batwing as the clan descended into cheers.

"We finally did it," Pebblepaw exclaimed. "We're warriors!"

Darkstorm nodded as all the cats lifted their voices to the sky.

Yes, we did it, She thought. *Not just become warriors, but we have changed the world.*

Epilogue

Epilogue

The warm breeze ruffled the tufts of fur along Pebblespash's spine as she, Thornriver, and Darkstorm made their way up the moorland slope. Her gaze was steadily fixed forward at their destination a few rolling slopes off in the distance.

"Breezestar was certainly eager to spend time with us," Thornriver remarked as the three cats made their way down the slope. "She was practically willing to escort the three of us all the way to the moonpool and back."

Darkstorm rolled her eyes. "You've certainly made an impression on plenty of cats," she grunted to Pebblesplash. "I mean at the last gathering she was practically blowing up at Eaglestar, Troutstar and Woodstar, but just now she was like a kit tripping over her tail."

Pebblesplash sighed. She knew her two closest clanmates were trying to distract her from the task at hand, and she appreciated it. They both knew she had been sitting beside Troutstar as his body was battling with infection from a fox battle they had had earlier, silently panicking.

"You'll do great," Troutstar had said, eyes bright with fever. "This Pebblesplash is a true leader, unlike how you were as a kit, trained by me, and unlike me either."

Pebblesplash sighed, but Darkstorm turned to her, voice bracing. "You're just going to StarClan to see some old friends," she reminded Pebblesplash. "Sure, you'll have a new name, and the title of leader afterwards, but StarClan knows these past moons as deputy you've been practically leading the clan."

Pebblesplash gave her clanmate a gentle shove. "And you know that I wouldn't have managed without you always checking over my big decisions, Darkstorm."

Darkstorm rolled her eyes, and continued limping up the slope. Thornriver followed in suit, and the two she-cats began to have a conversation, but Pebblesplash helped back. She wanted to be alone with the memories of the past for just a little while longer, before she pursued her new role. She began as far back as she could remember.

The days as a little kit, sneaking off alone, and trying to act as the leader of the group. Getting special training from Troutstar, and distancing herself from Spikewillow. The first attack she could remember by ThunderClan, ending up with her father dead.

Her eagerness to become an apprentice, and the first territory tour in which she had met ThunderClan. Training for battle, hunting and patrolling. The feeling of being alone, distancing herself from her denmates pettily.

Then there was Nightpaw's death. All these moons later, Pebblesplash would always live with guilt, even though he was happy with his two other littermates. Then, the escalations with Darkstorm, which led to the two falling into ThunderClan's grim grip. Darkstorm always lived with the guilt of what had happened there too, Pebblesplash understood.

The days as a hostage. Watching kits being attacked mercilessly finally provoking action. Creating the Paws United, and the tedious days that ensued as she searched for followers.

Pebblesplash forced her paws forward, towards Darkstorm and Thornriver. She would fall behind and lose sight of them if she stopped for too long.

Then the battle. Pebbleslpash's mind immediately cringed as she remembered the broken bodies, and her following Darkstorm into StarClan to pull her newfound friend back. That was the first time they realised how connected they had become over their shared trauma.

After that, the trial apprenticeship. Things had slowed down for a while, as Pebblesplash found her groove in RiverClan; a few skirmishes, nothing major. Min and the rest of the Paws United

came every six seasons for a quarter moon, and Pebblesplash got to talk with her close friends.

Then, she had become deputy a long while later, maybe two years after she became a warrior. *Have I been alive for... four years now?!*

As deputy, Pebblesplash had welcomed several loners in during a particularly bad storm. Then, Batwing's mate was expecting kits, but Batwing died of wounds that the same fox that had killed Troutstar had inflicted.

Now, Pebblespalsh was beginning a new chapter in her life, but at least she was doing it with her friends and clanmates. She trusted them all with her life, and expected nothing in return.

"Are you ready?" Pebblesplash was awakened from her thoughts by Thornriver's mew.

She suddenly realised that all three of the cats were just about to enter the moonpool area. Trying to put conviction into her voice, Pebblesplash mewed, "I am."

As one, the three cats padded down the spiral path with dimples in the stone left by countless generations of cats, farther back than even the clans themselves. Pebblesplash was swept away with the realisation of how special it was that she even existed in this world. How special it was to be alive.

When the three cats reached the bottom of the path, Thornriver gestured to a pool which reflected the stars shining above it. It was the most beautiful thing Pebblesplash had ever seen. She turned and saw Darkstorm padding towards the pool, her head tilted in curiosity.

"So this is where Medicine Cats commune with StarClan," she echoed.

Thornriver's pelt was ruffled. "I wish it was that easy," she admitted. "Often they don't share with us, or leave vague messages, because the truth is, they are just cats like us. They have some powers, yes, but foresight is not among them."

Darkstorm nodded and turned to Pebblesplash, eyes dark, with the memories of countless cats' deaths. Pebblesplash padded forward towards the pool, and laid down beside it.

"Guess this is where we leave you," Darkstorm mewed stiffly.

Pebblesplash turned. "You don't have to," she mewed, and Darkstorm hesitated by the pool's edge.

"Thornriver?" Darkstorm mewed softly.

Thornriver shrugged ruefully. "If it gives you closure, Darkstorm, I say it's a good idea. I'm staying in the living world, though." Thornriver settled down. "I should prepare Troutstar's body for vigil."

Darkstorm nodded to the Medicine Cat solemnly as Thornriver padded up the slope. After a few heartbeats, the black she-cat laid herself down beside Pebblesplash and sighed.

"Are you ready to go to StarClan again?" she asked.

Pebblesplash gave her a nod. "I think so."

The two cats touched their noses to the clear water in sync. Pebblesplash stared at the deep pool of the water, and the stars that glinted in it until her eyes began to grow heavy. She closed them, and felt all the tension in her muscles dissipate.

When Pebblesplash blinked open her eyes once more, she was in a starlit clearing. There was grass underpaw, and it felt somehow similar. With a skip in her heartbeat, Pebblesplash realised that this was where she and Darkstorm had talked with Nightpaw and his siblings all those moons ago. She wondered how they were doing.

Turning, Pebblesplash saw Darkstorm standing a tail length away from her. Her clanmate's eyes were wide, and she stared off in the distance as though reliving the memory of the last time she had been here.

"Pebblesplash! Darkstorm!" Pebblesplash turned to see Nightpaw racing up to her and Darkstorm, his eyes round with happiness.

He rubbed his cheek along Pebblesplash, and weaved around her and Darkstorm, eyes bright with joy. Behind him Pebblesplash saw the distinct figure of nine shapes. She narrowed her eyes trying to see them, but stars blotted out their figure.

Nightpaw turned to Darkstorm and blinked. "Would you like to sit with us for the ceremony?" he asked.

Darkstorm's eyes widened as Nightpaw gestured to their other two littermates, Shinepaw and Duskpaw, and nodded. "Sounds great!" she mewed eagerly.

As Shinepaw and Duskpaw turned to greet Darkstorm, Nightpaw turned back. "Good luck," he mewed. "We're all here for you." Then he turned away.

Pebblesplash felt disappointed that Nightpaw wasn't going to give her her first life, but she still pricked her ears, and narrowed her eyes as a cat came forward. Her eyes were a deep piercing blue, and her pelt had spiky tufts of fur all over it.

"Who-" Pebblesplash began, but the cat cut her off.

"My name is Spikestream, your mother's mother." The she-cat glanced back at the stars, her eyes rueful. "I died giving birth to Spikewillow, and thus your grandfather named her after me."

Pebblestream dipped her head low to the she-cat as Spikestream touched noses with her.

"With this life," the she-cat mewed. "I give you determination. Use it to remain strong regardless of what trials come your way."

Pebblesplash felt agony sear through her body, and her legs trembled. She felt the pain of countless generations of cats, as they fought even though the circumstances were grim. Pebblesplash lifted her head to Spikestream as the pain subsided.

"Thank you," she gasped.

The next three cats that Pebbleblesplash met were all warriors that she had lived with as an apprentice. Iceleap gave her a life for

compassion, Frostbark gave her a life for wisdom, and then Basstail gave her a life for growth. Then there was Troutstar who gave her a life for courage.

Pebblesplash was gasping for breath by the time Troutstar had turned away. She eyed the stars, wondering who would give her a life next.

The sixth cat that stepped forward was a short, stocky brown tom with pale blue eyes. Pebblesplash tilted her head as the cat padded forward. He was so familiar, and yet she couldn't figure out who it was.

"I'm Treeleap," the cat explained. "Your father." His eyes were sad as he padded closer to Pebblesplash. "It was so hard to die, knowing that you were going to grow up without a father. It was even harder when I knew how much danger you were in."

Treeleap took a steadying breath. "With this life, I give you perspective. Use it when all else fails to understand others."

Pebblesplash was suddenly soaring over all the clan territories as though she was a hawk. She saw kits, apprentices, warriors, queens, elders. Each and every one of them had a story, loves and fears.

By the time Pebblesplash had returned, Treeleap had gone away. The next cat that met Pebblesplash's expression was a young tortoiseshell she-cat.

She touched noses with Pebblesplash almost immediately.

"I was a ThunderClan apprentice once," she mewed. My father and I tried to lead a rebellion, but it only ended in Mightystar slaughtering both of us." She touched noses with Pebblesplash. "With this life I give you bravery. Use it so that you can stand up, even when the circumstances are grim."

As she padded away, a brown tom practically leaped up to Pebblesplash.

"Mack!" Pebblesplash let out a cry of joy.

Mack purred as he wove towards Pebblesplash, his green eyes were bright with happiness. "These cats let me come to give you a life," he explained, and dipped his nose to Pebblesplash's forehead.

"With this life I give you peace. Use it to find a way to end conflict that doesn't end in the bloodshed of innocents."

As Mack padded away, one more cat took his place. His black fur was ruffled in anticipation, and he smiled as he turned to Pebblesplash.

"Nightpaw!"

Nightpaw purred. "You didn't think I would miss this would you?" he blinked at her teasingly, then touched noses with Pebblestream.

"With this life, I give you love. Love is what ties clanmates together, it runs deep inside each one of this, and is stronger than even kin."

Sudden agony scorched across Pebblestream, more painful than anything she had ever felt before. In the midst of it all, she focussed on Nightpaw. His face, his eyes. *This is what it truly means to be a warrior,* she thought. *To lay down your life because you love each and every one of your clanmates no matter what.*

When the pain subsided, Nightpaw dipped his head to her, and cheers rang up from around the crowd of cats. "Pebblestar! Pebblestar! Pebblestar!"

The stars that had once been warriors of StarClan began to fade into the distance, until Pebblestar was only left with Nightpaw and his littermates.

Darkstorm bounded up to her, eyes bright. "Pebblestar!" her eyes were wide. "Now we're tied for most name changes in the clan," she added teasingly.

Pebblestar stared into the distance, suddenly feeling as though her life was about to change forever. And yet, she wasn't scared. She was proud, and she knew that she would face whatever happened with her clanmates at her side.

"You know," Nightpaw sidled up to her. "There's this thing that leaders can do. They can make cats warriors. My littermates have more than earned that, if you'd be willing to give them warrior names."

Pebblestar's eyes widened. "Really?" she squeaked. "You want *me* to give you guys warrior names?"

"Yes!" Shinepaw puffed out his chest eagerly. "Please?"

Pebblestar blinked at Shinepaw, Duskpaw and Nightpaw. Something about the lives she had been given made her able to see right into the hearts of the three cats who should have been made warriors seasons ago. The names came out easily.

"Nightpaw, Duskpaw, and Shinepaw, you more than deserve warrior names, so I give you these names that honour your traits and who you are." Pebblestar took a deep breath as the three cats watched her, eyes wide. "Duskpaw, from this day forward you shall be known as Dusklight in honour of your compassion and diligence. Shinepaw, your name will be Shinesky in honour of your creativity and pride."

The two cats' eyes were bright as they stared at each other. Both of them touched Pebblestar's nose and sat down beside Darkstorm.

Pebblestar took a deep breath, "Nightpaw?" Nightpaw bounded forward, and purred.

"You're doing great."

Pebblestar stared at the sky. "Nightpaw, from this moment on, you shall be known as Nightmoon, for like the moon, you shine bright, and truly are deserving of the name from the stars."

"Dusklight! Shinesky! Nightmoon!"

Every cat lifted up their muzzles to the sky, and purred happily. Pebblestar blinked as she saw the pure happiness in Nightmoons's eyes as he weaved around his littermates.

Darkstorm met Pebblestar's eyes and smiled.

"I'm going to miss them," she meowed, nodding to the three cats. "They're all our age, yet it feels like I hardly know Shinesky and Dusklight."

Pebblestar stared into the stars. "We will one day," she vowed. "Once everything is truly right in the living world, we'll live here with the three of them."

Darkstorm's eyes glittered with starlight. "We've got our work cut out for us first," she grunted. "But I'm glad that we've made it this far already."

Pebblestar nodded. "There is one more thing, though."

Darkstorm glanced at her sharply. "What?"

"Will you be my deputy?"

Acknowledgements

For those who made it this far into this story, I can't thank you enough. When I first started writing this fanfic, I never expected it to get where it is now. It was just a little thing that I worked on from time to time, and eventually all those little times added up into something that's over 90,000 words!

Again, I can't thank you enough for reading this little story about two cats! It was a wild ride to say the least writing it, and I'm happy to share it.

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Special thanks to Sparkpaw/fall for being the second person ever to give me their thoughts on my fanfic! You should read their story, Falling Comets (book one is finished as of 12/31/22!) which is awesome! Thanks so much again for reading and giving your thoughts, Sparkpaw! I really appreciate your support!

(Ps, if you would like to be put in the acknowledgments as one of my first every readers, you can reply below with your name, and anything else you want me to add!)

Enjoyed Thundering Darkness? I am currently working on another fanfic that continues right from where this one finished off. I'll post the blurb and link here!

A Warriors fan-fiction saga unfolds featuring Brownpaw, Swiftpaw, and Lightningpaw as they navigate the world in an increasing state

of chaos. Swiftpaw lives in ThunderClan, where suffocating standards are leading to outright war. Brownpaw's clan is crumbling to pieces, with attacks from all sides. Meanwhile, at the helm of it all, a mysterious cat arrives in RiverClan in the middle of a devastating storm with no memories of his past life. This cat, renamed Lightningpaw must find the truth before all the clans fall to a mysterious threat.

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